

Commemorating Piya Tan's 5th cycle

Simple Joys



PIYA TAN

edited by Ratna Lim

The
Minding Centre

Singapore

Simple Joys by Piya Tan ©2009, 2011

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online edition

by

PIYA TAN

Edited by

RATNA LIM EI GEIK

THE MINDING CENTRE

Singapore

2011

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The Minding Centre, based in Singapore, is part of Piya Tan's Dharma ministry. It was founded in 2006 to provide Dharma-based non-religious service to those in need of counsel and solace. It also serves as a haven and hub for those seeking Dharma by way of meditation and education, Sutta study and translation, and spiritual experience. The Centre also supports and promotes Piya Tan in his full-time Buddhist and related work.

The Sutta Discovery Series is part of the Living Word of the Buddha project which aspires to encourage and facilitate Buddhist Studies, both in a Dharma-inspired and academic manner for personal development as well as outreach work on a local and global scale. The Minding Centre and the Living Word of the Buddha project are motivated and guided by the vision of mere Buddhism.

The mere Buddhist vision. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Dharma, or “non-religious Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the Buddha Dharma, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as a streamwinner, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the Okkanti Saṃyutta (S 25).
Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free

Piya Tan (TAN Beng Sin), 1949-

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One gives
for the sake of adorning the mind,
as a support for the mind

(Aṭṭha Dāna Sutta, A 8.31/4:236)¹

&

That our beloved sons

Tan Lim Chai Leng
Tan Lim Chai Seng

may love the true Dharma

&

That you who read this
would aspire to be streamwinners

¹ See SD 6.6.

CONVENTIONS

The following conventions are used in this book:

SD n.x	<i>Sutta Discovery</i> by Piya Tan, where n denotes volume number and x is the chapter number. Link: http://dharmafarer.org	
D	Dīgha,nikāya	Long Discourses
M	Majjhima,nikāya	Middle Length Discourse
S	Saṃyutta,nikāya	Connected Discourses
A	Aṅg'uttara,nikāya	Numerical Discourse
Kh	Khuddaka,pāṭha	
Dh	Dhammapada	
DhA	Dhammapada Commentary	
U	Udāna	
It	Iti,vuttaka	
Sn	Sutta,nipāta	
Tha	Thera,gāthā	
ThaA	Thera,gāthā Commentary	
Thi	Therī,gāthā	
ThīA	Therī,gāthā Commentary	
J	Jātaka	
J or JA	Jātaka Commentary	
Vism	Visuddhi,magga	

Cover picture:

An olive-back sunbird, Singapore's most-friendly bird builds a nest on a dried-up potted plant right in front of Piya's house door. See pages 64-65 for "7.5 The Sunbird And Free Will."

MESSAGE
from Bhante Sujato Bhikkhu

Piya Tan is a rare teacher in the Buddhist world. Based on his own extensive experience, his authentic, intelligent inquiry into the Buddha's words is applied to the urgent task of discovering how to best live in a changing and challenging world.

I have often used his detailed studies of Buddhist scriptures as guides for my own classes.

In *Simple Joys*, however, he speaks not as a scholar, but as a practitioner. In this he shows the paradoxical truth of a genuine spiritual path: as complex and demanding as it may be, the deepest truths are always simple.

With metta,

Bhante Sujato
Abbot of Santi Forest Monastery
Australia

18 Sep 2009

PREFACE: Five Cycles

This month (August 2009), according to the Chinese lunar calendar, was my 5th cycle, that is, the zodiac (the world system, if you like) has made five times. I am 60. I have a birthday wish; but first, the realities.

A few days before my 59th birthday (2008), the Firefly Mission (FFM) told me that they have to stop supporting our family with the monthly \$1200 stipend (which is the only regular support we get).

I was told that donations had effectively stopped coming in, and that the FFM was about relief work, not Dharmaduta—which was fine with me, as nothing is permanent. I must thank all those pledgers, donors and supporters, and above all the FFM for the commitment thus far.

I'm a full-time lay Dharma worker with Ratna as wife, housewife, mother, secretary, and manager with two pre-secondary children. (She is the hardest-working person I know.) With the FFM stipend and donations, and careful budgeting, we have no problem with finance. We are able to make our monthly house repayments as well as pay for the monthly rental of the Minding Centre (TMC).

The on-going Sutta translation work also needs funding, especially for the computer and related peripherals, printing of study volumes, etc. When the FFM members learned of this, they fervently renewed their effort and reinstated the monthly stipend, which of course come as a great relief for me and my family. I can again fully focus on the Sutta translating, Dharma teaching and ministry.

Unlike foreign missions and visiting speakers who often raise funds for their project back home, we shy away from such efforts. Dharma mission needs money, true, but not so much. We should rather spend our time studying the Suttas, learning meditation, doing

meaningful social work, keeping the precepts, and reminding the monastics here (in one way or another) to keep them, too.

In 2008, I had thought of closing down TMC so that we are less burdened with funds, but Dharma-moved friends appealed to me not to do so. Unasked, a number of them pledged to support the running of the TMC. So TMC lives on.

The reasons for keeping TMC is simple: we value Sutta translation and study, Dharma courses and people-helping. We are not a large or colourful temple or centre, but the kind of learning and teaching that goes on at TMC is ground-breaking and can only happen in such a special place.

There are a few people who were not impressed with TMC because it is not big and has no big Buddha images, etc. The point is there are so many other such places, where they could go. The TMC is like the lay bodhisattva Vimalakirti's house (small outside, big inside).

The TMC is the office and workshop of the "Sutta Discovery" translation project. Its website makes Sutta translations freely available worldwide. We have feedback from monastics and lay Buddhists alike from beyond Singapore who regularly use the Sutta Discovery translation series: Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Malaysia, Puerto Rico, the UK, the USA, Canada, Serbia, South Africa, Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

We often have students from overseas coming to the TMC, and it also caters for seekers and clients from many other religions or no religion. Through our "non-religious" services (especially counselling and meditation) we have just as many clients who are Bahais, Daoists, Muslims, Catholics, Methodists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Sikhs, and others. We are deeply inspired to be able to reach out to non-Buddhists, planting in them a happy and deep respect for the Dharma while practising their own faith. In fact, I see

this as a futuristic trend: people of faith making the Dharma a part of their spiritual growth.

Above all, the TMC is a Bodhi-mandala (a circle of friends dedicated to awakening in this life) where those whose lives have been touched by the Dharma meet. We are mostly working-class people with a big dream: we are determined to make TMC a success, as if the future of Singapore Buddhism depends on it. Indeed, the great thing is that most of us *are* Singapore Buddhists.

We meet not as Sinhala, or Myanmarese, or Thai, or Japanese, or Tibetan, or Chinese Buddhists, but simply as *Singapore* Buddhists. Not many temples or centres in Singapore can do that. Of course, it is best to meet simply as *Buddhists*, but this only happens when we let go of labels in our meditation. So the best skillful means in the real world is still a bit of labeling. The idea is to focus our genius, resources and priorities on the ground that supports us so that we are in a better position to help the world.

We at the TMC know that in time to come, Buddhists here will stand up and say that TMC has worked for a Singapore Buddhism but with a global vision.

My life work is of course the annotated Sutta translation. Looking back the past half century of my life, I recall I have always loved books and learning, and so the Suttas naturally attract me. Indeed, what I am doing now is only a continuation of the Sutta work which started in my monk years. We now have better tools (digitized Buddhist scriptures, computers, etc), better scholarship, and more accessible forest monastics.

The ability of the Sutta Discovery translation to sustain the attention and interest of students is its *thematic* approach. Every three months, I work on a theme (eg giving, meditation, right view, etc) to produce a volume of annotated translations and essays.

If all goes well (if I live to say around 80 and still have a lucid mind), by 2030 I will be able to produce just over 100 volumes of the Sutta Discovery. However, due to the detailed study of the suttas, the work is still only about half-finished. (Then again, life is so uncertain; so, please don't wait to commit yourself to Buddhist work, especially as a lay Buddhist worker.)

In my twilight decades I hope to give focussed training to a group of **committed full-time and part-time lay Buddhist workers** who would be able to carry on the Dharma work according to their genius and inclination.

Then I will move on confidently that we have a legacy of a very rich Sutta tradition and Dharma-inspired living, upon whose foundation more Dharma-moved work can meaningfully and effectively grow, even beyond Singapore.

Meantime, we need to work very hard to protect the Dharma from an early end at the hands of self-propelled modernists and monastic moneytheists and Māra's growing presence.

The Suttas are the only true relics of the Buddha, which we can bring to life with our own inner calm and vision.

May wherever you are be a place of joyful stillness and clear vision.

20 August 2009

"Pali House," Singapore

PIYA TAN (1949-?2030)

Piya Tan, a former **Theravada monk** of 20 years, is doing an annotated translation of the early Pali Suttas, harmonizing between the historical critical method and Dharma-moved inspiration, and teaching them. Piya specializes in early Buddhism and its application today. His Sutta translations are especially popular with the forest monastics.

In the 1980s, working closely with Dr Ang Beng Choo, project director of the Buddhist Studies Team (BUDS), Piya was consultant and regular lecturer. BUDS successfully introduced **Buddhist Studies in Singapore Secondary Schools**.

After that, he was invited by Prof Lewis Lancaster as a visiting scholar to **the University of California at Berkeley, USA**. He has written a number of educational books on Buddhism (such as *Total Buddhist Work*) and social surveys (such as *Buddhist Currents* and *Charisma in Buddhism*).

As a **full-time Dharma teacher**, he runs regular Sutta and Dharma classes at various temples, centres and tertiary Buddhist societies. He practises Buddhist counseling therapy using a combination of Forest-Insight meditation and Sutta-based psychology.

Piya often critically writes on contemporary Buddhist-related issues, and often speaks out against the misinformation, misuse and abuse of Buddhism. He sees Buddhism as a humanistic and life-affirming way to spiritual awakening, and has great faith in gaining it in this life.

In his free time, he loves teaching his children and Ratna to think critically and enjoy the wonders of nature.

For more information see Wiki Piya:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piya_Tan

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AN ACT OF FAITH

The Minding Centre (TMC) is an act of faith. The TMC is a witness to the living truth of the Buddha Dharma.

We have no sizeable or regular source of income, but rely fully on your own faith and support. We are never sure when our next cheque or donation will come, or how much, but we know it will come.

We set up the TMC because

- (1) we have firm faith in the authenticity and spirituality of the Dharma;
- (2) we are convinced that a good understanding of the Suttas will clear wrong views and practices;
- (3) we can rely on locals to be truly good and self-reliant Buddhists;
- (4) we know that exemplary lay followers will inspire monastics to keep to their training and rules, and become even better teachers for the benefit of all.

Above all, we are committed to the vision that we can attain spiritual liberation in this life itself by gaining at least streamwinning. The Suttas are very clear about this (see *Saṃyutta* ch 25).²

In our quest for spiritual wisdom and liberation, we need to make some sacrifices. Rents and maintenance have to be paid for. Sometimes the cost can be quite high, so it seems. But nothing can measure up to the Dharma: how much is the Dharma worth in dollars?

² For details, see S 25.1 = SD 16.7; S 25.5 see SD 17.3 (4.5.1); S 25.6, see SD 17.4 (10).

We need more than money to run efforts like the TMC: we need faith. Otherwise, it is just a successful business.

The Dharma is immeasurable. We remind ourselves of this in our lovingkindness meditation. Lovingkindness is unconditional love for all beings, including ourselves, in term of spiritual development.

If your heart is truly in the Dharma, you will have no fear. Help and compassion are always around the corner.

If your heart is in the Dharma, you will have a vision of wondrous things to come.

We thank you for your Dharma-moved pledges. With a few more regular (monthly, quarterly, even annual) pledgers, we will at least cover our monthly rental.

More importantly, do join us for the Sutta experience whenever you can, and tell others about this wonderful opportunity at the TMC.

Even if you make no pledge or have not donated, you are even more welcome to join in the Sutta study. For, your presence witnesses your faith in the Dharma.

May we remember and support local Dharma efforts for the local presence of the Buddha Dharma for the benefit of all.

Let us be the roots and shoots from which a beautiful Bodhi tree will grow in Singapore in due course.

— — —

1 WEALTH AND HAPPINESS

1.1 The Eight Winds of Life

The year 2008 has a lot of things to teach us and bring the best out of ourselves—if we choose to do so. There is a real danger, when we follow any religion or system, to gravitate to some teachings or habits that tend to reinforce our pet notions or eccentricities. Our true spiritual life begins when we notice this, accept it and let go of it, and turn to the real self-healing and self-knowing.

Gain and Loss

Many people turn to a religion asking, what can it do for them? They see religion as another business transaction. But this appears to be a one-way deal. This is like someone who gives a small donation in a religious way, expecting bigger returns.

The point is that great gains come from honest hard work and this is our safest bet. Anyone telling us there is an easy way to make more money or more happiness, think twice about this and think again. Why would he be telling us about this if he is really rich and happy?

Loss arises from greed, hate and stupidity. 2008 has shown us this kind of loss can become a worldwide phenomenon. And one by one the dishonest are coming out of the woodwork.

When we do not understand *impermanence*, we measure ourselves and others in terms like things and number. Impermanence means change. Whenever a change comes to our life, always look at how this can better ourselves. Then we will discover that every night is followed by a bright dawn.

Fame and Obscurity

Many people, knowingly or unknowingly, turn to religion because they enjoy the attention they get. This is not really bad in itself, but

1 Wealth and happiness

can be addictive if it stops just there. The need for attention almost always points something seriously missing in our life.

Find out what is it that we are really missing, and we will find we do not need that attention, that fame. That is when we really begin to give the best of our heart and mind.

Obscurity can be advantageous, too, because we can be whatever we desire! Being famous, we often need to live up to expectations, namely, projecting those images that make us famous. We are not our true self: we become what people want us to be!

The point is not to think in terms of fame and obscurity, but be our true self. This begins with learning to think of others in a wholesome way.

When we truly pay good attention to others, we become a part of their lives forever. A simple guideline: "The most important person is the one we are with; the most important moment is now."

Praise and Blame

Many people turn to religion thinking all their problems are solved by it. This is because there is this powerful being who loves us, who takes care of us, who protects us, and so on. Isn't this the way we think when we were helpless children. These are the kind of religion that does not really want us to grow, much less to think for ourselves.

It feels good when we are accepted by the group, when we win the praise and approval of others. But where is all this taking us? We have become lemmings going in one direction.

Enjoying the approval of others may mean that we lack self-confidence. We should instead examine *why* we lack self-confidence. A good way to do this is to do lovingkindness meditation with this simple exercise:

Find some quiet time and tell yourself: “I accept myself just as I am. May I be well and happy!” Go on telling this to yourself, and we will be more than surprised with the result in due course.

Happiness and Sorrow

Many people turn to a religion asking what it can do for them. But the true answer lies in asking the right question, such as “What can I do to truly be happy?” If this is the real question we have been wanting to ask, then the Buddha’s way would be the best one for us.

Real happiness is not about what we have. To *have* something simply means a proximity to something: “I have money” basically means the money has not benefitted us. What makes us really rich is what we really *are*.

If we *are* happy, if we *are* wise, if we *are* compassionate, we will look at gain and loss with the same eyes. For, there is no other way to look at the world. That’s the way the world is. If we just look at these words, we may find fault with them, but look beyond them, deep into our heart for the true answer.

A double happy new year (2008)!

1.2 Ways of Enjoying Your Wealth

Who should enjoy wealth?

A monastic who is involved with money is like a small boat with a leak, but money is what money buys (things, services, pleasure, etc). Soon, there are many leaks in the boat. Some claim that money is only a “small rule.” But it is nevertheless still a rule, otherwise the Buddha would not have introduced it. This “small rule” prevents a small leak in the boat.

1 Wealth and happiness

If monastics continue to be super-wealthy and live good lives, then the authorities might start to tax them. Then what is the difference between the serious, hard-working, lay practitioner and a comfortable moneyed monastic?

A monastic who wants to deal with money should de-robe and work as a lay Dharma worker, where he would be just even more effective (using his management skills, doing social work, etc), if he is not attached to a uniform and prestige.

Lay Buddhists, however, can and should enjoy all the wealth they want, but in a Dharma-inspired, meritorious and wholesome way.

How to plan your finances

In the Ādiya Sutta (A 5.41 = SD 2.1), the Buddha advises us concerning our finances in this way:

He divides his wealth into four:
One part he should enjoy,
With two he invests in his work,
And the fourth he should save
Should there be any misfortune.

In other words, we should “enjoy” the first quarter (25%) of our income or wealth, that is, bring joy or satisfaction to our daily living; half (50%) should be usefully invested; and the last quarter (25%) should be saved.

How to enjoy your wealth

Putting together the teachings of the Dīgha,jānu Sutta (A 8.54 = SD 5.10) and the Anaṇa Sutta (A 4.62), we have the following advice for lay Buddhists and wealth:

- (1) Accomplishment of diligence, leading to the joy of ownership.
- (2) Accomplishment of watchfulness, leading to the joy of enjoyment.
- (3) Spiritual friendship, leading to the joy of blamelessness.

(4) Balanced livelihood, leading to the joy of debtlessness.

By (1) is meant that if you work hard and healthily, you feel a great sense of satisfaction at your work and wealth rightfully gained.

By (2) is meant that you should guard well your hard-earned wealth so that you do not lose it through natural disasters, legal problems, exploitation or foolishness. In other words, you should keep your wealth safe (eg in a good bank) or invest it (say by buying insurance).

By (3) is meant that you should make sure you keep good friends and avoid negative environments. Bad friends not only drain you energy but also easily get you into trouble. Frequenting negative places (like red-light areas and gambling joints) surely leads to various disasters (see Sigāl'ovāda Sutta, D 31 = SD 4.1). Breaking the precepts also leads to loss of wealth in various ways.

By (4) is meant that you should live within your means. If you have the means, live reasonably well, take proper food, dress well, go for wholesome holidays and retreats where you can do some meditation. A great advantage of having surplus wealth is that you can easily discharge your debts and do good works.

If you are not rich, live within you budget.

Planning you finances

According to the Ādiya Sutta (A 5.41), the first 25%, the quarter for personal use, can be put to five wholesome uses, namely:

- (1) Personal and family use;
- (2) For the benefit of friends;
- (3) As security and insurance;
- (4) The fivefold offering: to relatives, to guests, to the departed, to the government (as payment of taxes, etc), and to devas;
- (5) For supporting worthy religious.

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- (1) Charity begins at home by making sure your family and dwelling are well provided for, and there are enough savings. (If you are living alone, your Dharma friends and wholesome companions are your family: see Dh 204.)
- (2) Charity begins at home, but should not end there. Beyond the family, friends are our next sphere of happiness. A wise generous person is well loved by friends.
- (3) As already mentioned under section on “How to enjoy your wealth,” that is, you should wisely protect your wealth.
- (4) needs some careful comments. Use your surplus when right and necessary to benefit relatives and friends.

“The departed” here refers to our ancestors, that is, remembering the good they have done, and such memory can be a positive bond we keep with living family members, too. At the end of our meditations, with a peaceful mind, we should dedicate merits to them with lovingkindness.

“The devas” here refer to the Buddha’s times, when some lay followers who are not yet fully Buddhists still follow some cultural beliefs. So if you do not worship devas (like the Sinhalese, Myanmarese or Thais do), you need not do so (this is all included in the cultivation of lovingkindness). For us today, this advice refers to keeping a suitable and simple shrine at home (if we like), spending the Buddhist holidays in a proper and happy way, and respecting nature and our environment.

How Buddhist pledges work

The fifth use of wealth (“for supporting worthy religious”), as stated in the Ādiya Sutta, is very significant. If we have surplus wealth or can afford it, we should support good monastics (by giving them the four monastic necessities, but not cash) and lay Dharma workers (supporting financially and other ways).

Monastics are generally well supported by the Buddhist public, but the lay Dharma workers are a new situation today, and are becoming more necessary, especially where monastics are becoming more laicized (becoming more financially well off and behaving more like lay people, but don't pay taxes).

Full-time lay Dharma workers have to work harder than monastics because, unlike monastics, Dharma workers also have to seek funds for their Dharma work and to support themselves. Furthermore, they lack the uniformed charisma of the monastics. So we have to look beyond charisma, and support the good work that is done.

The TMC runs fully on funds from its public projects (classes, courses, counselling, etc) and from pledgers like yourself. The idea is to give what you can (even little) but to do so regularly so that the TMC rent and maintenance, and the Sutta Translation project, could be managed, and our regular activities go smoothly, especially for the non-Buddhists who are coming in quiet growing numbers for meditation, counselling and spiritual guidance. (They understand that “even non-Buddhists can practise Buddhism.”)

Pledges are also known as “regular giving” (*nicca, dāna*). It is a kind of training in commitment in merit, in faith, in joy and in a vision that we can do much more together to being greater happiness to ourselves and others where we live and even beyond. It is a practice in lovingkindness where we show active lovingkindness beyond ourselves.

“When you give happily, you are giving happiness.”

2 LEARNING FROM OUR PAINS

2.1 How self-healing works

In all my 40 years of Buddhist counselling, I notice that all my clients invariably claim that they are suffering some kind of emotional pain, but at the end of it their smile speaks of their first step to healing. The Buddhist dynamics of mind-healing is simple, compassionate and effective. Let me briefly talk about how and why Buddhist counseling works.

First, have the client define what the pain really is about and not to make it bigger than what it really is. (Never tell the client “It’s all right!” If so, he would not come for counselling!) The client will be telling me a lot about himself or herself, some relevant, some not so relevant. The idea is to look for signs and patterns in the forest of words for the tree of truth. We work together to identify the real or main issue.

Second, help the client discover the causes of his pain, which means he needs to examine some deeper, even unconscious, aspects of his life. The purpose is to bring the client into a mindful awareness and acceptance of these causes as they are. We can prepare and protect ourselves better when we know and see the “enemy.”

It is also at this stage, the client is taught the Buddhist teachings of “non-ownership of pain” (that is, not clinging on to the victim mentality, as stated in Dh 3-4), and of “dealing with the problem, not person” (as taught in the Araṇa,vibhaṅga Sutta, M 139).

Third, I would facilitate the client to work out various alternatives or possibilities of solutions. At this point, knowing the issues and client better, I will be able to clarify why certain strategies would work better than others.

This is when I would teach the client some lovingkindness, which essentially is unconditional self-acceptance of oneself and of others, of forgiving, of opening the doors of the heart. In some cases, the problem is powerfully rooted in a sense of self-guilt; so, he is now able to free himself from all notions of sin, lack of self-worth and fear.

In the fourth and last stage, the client is briefed, by way of summary and reinforcement, the roots of the issue, its manifestations, the client's helpless reactions to such stimuli, and most importantly, how now to wisely work with them.

It is at this point, too, the client can be given the teaching of the "present moment." A simple definition of "problem" is something about the past or future that we feel powerless over. The client is taught how to spend more time, if not all the time, in the present moment, where true reality is. And to empower himself to live and enjoy the present moment.

Buddhism has many tools to help us live the present moment effectively, happily and creatively. Often, the client would be taught some simple guided meditation, or better, to attend a full course of beginner's meditation. They are also encouraged to attend a course on Buddhist psychology and similar courses that explain how the mind and meditation works. In this way, they have a fuller theoretical and practical grasp of self-empowerment, self-help and self-healing, which Buddhist counseling is really about.

Notice that so far, I have never used the word "advice," as counselors are not advisors. The reason for this is simple and important: we only have a limited window of time with the client (say an hour or so), and this is too short to give any advice which might affect the client indefinitely.

We are more effective counsellors by facilitating or refereeing the client in learning how he should look at issues and situations more

2 Learning from our pains

objectively and wisely. The special power of Buddhist counselling is that it blesses us with self-empowerment. We do not need to rely on any “other” power, be it someone else (like someone to blame or to emotionally depend on) or something else (like a God-idea or demons).

Our problems arise in our minds, and they are best corrected there, and by ourselves. We initially suffer because we know something is wrong, we know that we can be better than this. Buddhist counselling tells you how. It makes you a self-counsellor: Buddhism tells you that you are the best person to know yourself. Otherwise, you may need to examine your beliefs and values—and start with Buddhist counselling.

2.2 No pain, no gain

Buddhism gives the best explanation and solution to why there is suffering. Neither blaming anyone for it, nor seeking for answers in history or myths, the Buddha discovers the nature of suffering and how to end it, in the most effective way there is: at its source.

The Buddha goes through a lot suffering himself to find the answer to this cosmic problem. At first, as a young man, he thinks that sensual pleasures are the answer to our pains. After all, isn't pleasure the opposite of pain? Buddhist stories tell us that he enjoys every kind of sensual pleasure as a young prince.

The problem with pleasure is that it only delights us momentarily. If it is sustained, it begins to bore us, and we need to look for new ways of delighting ourselves. Pleasure is a word for our need for variety. Why do we need variety? Because we are always (often unconsciously) seeking for a way out of suffering.

If pleasure is only a temporary break from suffering, could the answer be in the opposite direction? Why not deprive the body

totally of pleasure, even torture it, so that, through pain, we will free ourselves of it. The Buddha, in his efforts here, reaches a point when he almost dies from physical exhaustion through self-mortification. He realizes that we need a healthy body to support a healthy mind.

One great advantage that the Buddha has is that he comes from an ancient society where religious contemplation is common. If he were born in a tribal community in the Middle East, troubled by wars, invasions, and unrest, he might have come up with a tribal religion that centres around some almighty God idea.

It is like natural selection in evolution, where what is best in us gets carried on until all these mental genes, as it were, manifest themselves in a single person: the Buddha. But evolution of species is just that: we evolve as a group, a tribe, a species.

But the group, tribe or species, can be so self-regulating as to be self-limiting, even narcissistic. The crowd does not think; only individuals think. Good thinking makes true individuals. There are those who think on their feet, but the Buddha, following the trend of his days, finds that it is more effective to think when we sit: sitting in meditation, that is.

As the Buddha sits peacefully in meditation, letting his thoughts come and go as they will, he discovers that a thousand voices are speaking at the same time. A crowd of voices, and the crowd does not think. So he lets the passing crowd of thoughts move on.

When that crowd of thoughts has receded into the background of his mind, a deep and great peace arises. It is so calm and clear, it is like looking into the lucid waters of a huge and deep pool, and able to see fishes, water creatures, beautiful pebbles, and treasures at the bottom.

2 Learning from our pains

Then he directs his laser-sharp and crystal-clear mind to the problem at hand. He uses what I call the “Why” method, or what is technically called “causal relations.”

Why do we suffer?

Because we are born.

Why are we born?

Because there are other humans.

Why are we born from other humans?

Because we cling to one another.

Why do we cling to one another?

Because of craving.

Why do we crave?

Because we feel.

Why do we feel?

Because of sense-stimuli.

Why are the senses stimulated?

Because we have the senses.

Why do we have the senses?

Because of mind and body?

Why are there mind and body?

Because of consciousness.

Why is there consciousness?

Because of our thoughts.

Why are there thoughts?

Because of ignorance.

Why is there ignorance?

I don't know.

Then the Buddha examines this whole process of suffering and how it arises in the reverse sequence, and he discovers the ending of suffering, and the path to its ending. The great 20th century poet, James Joyce, poetized this in his “Finnegans Wake” (1967:18), in these words:

In the ignorance that implies impression that knits knowledge that finds the nameform that whets the wits that convey contacts that sweeten sensation that drives desire that adheres to the attachment that dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality.

Suffering arises from ignorance. Ignorance is when we think we understand what we really are, but deep inside we are not really sure. We have thoughts after thoughts; we hold on to all kinds of views, especially those of God, gods, demons, spirits, and gurus; we are attracted to fleeting pleasures, and so on.

Suggested solution: Just keep on asking yourself *why*, and don't make a conscious effort to answer. Let your heart speak, and let it take its time. If you are courageous enough to examine the answers with another *why*, and so on, you will soon enough discover your true self.

2.3 Failure and Pain

Failure and pain does not mean that we are not good people. It means that there are certain aspects of our lives that we have yet to understand. Indeed, it takes some inner goodness to accept our failure and pain, and to learn from them.

Just as a beautiful lotus rises from the mud in the dark depths of the waters, so too if we look within our inner stillness, our potential will blossom in all its glory.

The Buddha is the greatest of living beings because he is the one who has suffered the most in various lives, and learned from them, and out of compassion he shares that wisdom with us.

2.4 So You Want to Kill Yourself?

Throughout my life as a monk and as a full-time lay Dharma teacher, I have heard people tell me they want to kill themselves. Let me relate a typical occasion when this happened. This is really worth talking about because it shows how Buddhism can help us understand and prevent suicide without blaming anyone.

Recently an old secondary school friend, a Christian (but an open-minded one), who was dealing with an at-risk school-boy, phoned me up to talk with this boy, who had been getting himself ever deeper into trouble, so that he was heading for “structured environment” (that is, a boy’s home).

In the course of our conversation, the boy, thinking he had no way out of his predicament, resignedly and quietly said, “I think I want to kill myself!” I have heard this many times before. Those who say they want to kill themselves are unlikely to do so; maybe they are simply asking for help.

Still, it is always vital to listen to what he is trying to say. The worst thing to say at such a moment is “It’s all right!” It is *not* at all right when someone says he is thinking of killing himself. We just have to keep on asking *why* until we have a good idea of the thoughts behind the words.

But familiarity with the boy’s case allowed me to take a short-cut. I reflectively asked him,

“So you think killing yourself will end your problems?”

“Yes! After we die, there is nothing what!”

“You think so? Look at a plant; it dies, but a seed grows into a new plant very much like it. The plant keeps on growing. It is ‘reborn’ again and again. If the soil is bad, there’s not enough sunlight, not enough water, the plant grows poorly.

But right now the plant is not doing well because it is not properly cared for. However, if the gardener takes good care of it, weeding it regularly, giving it enough sun, watering it, and so on, it would grow into a beautiful and healthy plant.

You are that plant; the gardener is your mind and your actions.”

As I talked I am reminded how difficult it would be for a God-believer like my friend to counsel the boy. If he were to say, “You *cannot* kill yourself because God created you,” or some argument along that line. If the boy were to simply admit, “I do not believe in God,” that would be the end of that help-line. Or worse, he might blame God for all his problems.

There is another problem: how do we know that karma and rebirth actually work. All we have as unawakened beings is the Buddha’s word, or more exactly, what we find in our scriptures. In the Suttas, we of course, have unequivocal and numerous statements reportedly by the Buddha himself that he has direct experience of these truths, and he is awakened, too.

As unawakened beings, we can say that such teachings as karma and rebirth are skillful means that inspire us to do good rather than evil. I find it very much easier to work with the ideas of karma and rebirth because *karma* deals with our behavior and *rebirth* gives us hope.

God is an idea of a supreme being outside and above ourselves. The notion of relying on an external being, especially a story-being, is not really empowering. This is like imagining we have a fairy god-mother always ready to help and protect us. If we are stuck with this notion, then we have what psychologists call a dependence problem: we will always need the group; we will be dependent on a father-figure; we will never really grow up.

3 Friendship

My point is that it is more empowering to tell people they can help themselves. We disempower ourselves when we lose ourselves in thoughts of our past, or when we are dragged into speculating about the uncertain future. Only the *now* can empower us, only *we* can empower ourselves. This is the heart of Buddhist social work and mental health.

3 FRIENDSHIP

3.1 My True-hearted Friend

(Inspired by the Sigālovāda Sutta, D 31 & Thānāni Sutta, A 4.192)

When you are careless, he cares for you
When you're not looking, he looks after you
In your fears, he is a safe refuge
In your lack, he gives more than you need
Do you remember this true-hearted friend?

His secrets he tells you to make you smile
Your secrets he keeps like his own
When you're troubled, he stands by you
He would even put you before himself
Do you remember this true-hearted friend?

When darkness clouds you, he shines a light
Gently he reminds you that good wins in the end
He tells you things you've never heard before
He shows you how to be happy here and now
Do you remember this true-hearted friend?

In your pains, he finds no joy
In your joys, he laughs with you
Who speaks ill of you, he shuns
Who speaks well of you, he lauds
Do you remember this true-hearted friend?

Living with a person, you see his goodness
Working with him, you know his honesty
In adversity, you truly taste his strength
Talking with him, you enjoy his wisdom

How do you know a true-hearted friend?
Look at him patiently
Watch him with wisdom

You can never find a true-hearted friend
You can only build friendship, show love
And learn to be true with all your heart
So that you are true-hearted yourself

4 LOVINGKINDNESS

4.1 Unconditional Love

The Straits Times of 1st January 2009 (Home) carries an article titled “Religious groups bumping up aid kitty.” It first mentions that the Singapore Buddhist Lodge has increased 2009's education budget from \$1 million to \$1.2 million. Significantly, the Lodge president explains, “What use is money if it's sitting in a bank?” after the global financial letdown that wiped almost \$400 billion off the local stock market (due to greed, dishonesty, and stupidity). The Buddhist Lodge is known to offer such help to any needy person even if they are not Buddhists.

Then, in the next paragraph, The Straits Times reports that the City Harvest Church, a local mega-church, is offering to pay its members' school fees and textbooks, and for some, computers. There are further conditions: successful applicants will have to fulfill 4 hours of community work (read church-related effort) and attend church services.

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This piece of report is interesting as it helps us to see the difference between conditional love and unconditional love. “Conditional love” basically means I will only love you if you listen to me, do as I say, and, often enough, be like me. This is a narrow and tribal attitude. If you do not belong to the gang, “body and soul,” you are out.

This was the situation with the brahmanical system up to the Buddha's time. There was the caste system then. An old story told that the brahmins (priest class) were born from God's mouth, so their task was to pray for others. Then, came the kshatriyas (warrior class) who arose from God's arms, so that their duty was to protect the priests. On a lower rung were the vaishyas (the business class), born from God's thighs: they were to serve and enrich the two upper classes. And fourthly, were the feet-born shudras (menial workers), who did all the lowly work none of the other classes would do.

Still, you would be lucky if you belonged to any of these classes, especially the first three. You were entitled to “benefit” from the prayers of the brahmins, that is, for a generous donation. There was a “fifth” non-class, the outcastes, who were mostly the dark-skinned natives.

The class or caste system was maintained by the fair-skinned Aryan invaders, and the creation myth was understandably invented by the brahmins for social control and self-advantage.

All this seemed to work for a few thousand years, that is, until the people became more settled and educated, and began to think for themselves. They realized the oppression of the brahmins, the “established church.” More importantly, after millennia of meditation history, many of them came closer to understanding the true nature of life. In the growing stillness of their spirituality, these yogis

noticed that the brahmins were simply enslaving their minds with false views and misguiding them with oppressive and false religion.

The new group of serious thinkers and reformers were called shramanas, that is, religionists who rejected the established brahmin “church.” The most prominent, and most awakened, of these anti-brahminical reform teachers are the Buddha.

The Buddha is the most prominent of the non-brahminical teachers because he speaks out the loudest and clearest against the oppressive and misguided brahmanical gurus and systems. The Buddha’s teachings in the Suttas that speak out against the blood sacrifices, social discriminations, exploitations and false teachings of the brahmanical system remain today as some of the most inspiring records of the struggle to free society and ourselves as individuals from systems (especially religion) than wants to herd us up like cattle with their God-idea, and cage us up like sheep with the eternal-life promises.

The Buddha teaches us to break out of these false cages and invisible fences, to free ourselves from tribal notions of religion. The Abrahamic religions that first arose in the Middle East are understandably the most tribal, because they lived in tribes in the deserts and wilderness, and they needed some kind of single-God-idea to unify them against other tribes and to be under the social control of the leader (almost always a male).

Even as I write, the Israelis and the Palestinians, both belonging to Abrahamic family of religion, are relentlessly and viciously bombing each other!

A wholesome large-scale effort is a secular government that protects religious freedom. This is perhaps the best we can do on a social level. There can only be true peace, prosperity and progress in an individual when he has unconditional love.

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In fact, early Buddhism teaches unconditionality on all levels. We begin by accepting ourselves unconditionally, just as we are, and start from there to better ourselves.

Then, we learn to see others just as they are, accepting them unconditionally, but we can only do this when we have accepted ourselves unconditionally (that is, uncaging our minds and freeing our hearts).

Buddhism also teaches us how to accept ourselves and others unconditionally, that is, through the cultivation of lovingkindness. May all beings (not just humans, but all beings, animals, non-humans, etc) be well and happy. We treat other as we would have ourselves treated, which is, of course, the golden rule. In this sense, Buddhism is the universal religion.

What does it mean to show unconditional love? When we meet a fallen being, we first try to help him up, and then teach him to help himself. When we meet a man hurt with an arrow, we gently remove that arrow, and nurse him so that the wound would heal itself.

No greater love has a man than this, that he *lives* for another. I say this unconditionally. (See Vism 9.40-41/307 & 9.108/321)

4.2 Lovingkindness is Simply Healing

Every public session of lovingkindness meditation I have conducted brings a sense of joyful peace at the end of it. Often there are silent, sullen, even unhappy faces, at the start of the sitting, but at the end of the lovingkindness session, whether it is of the Forest Tradition or the Insight Method, the meditators show themselves to be more relaxed and smiling.

Sometimes the response of such meditators can be dramatic. There were occasions when a tough-looking person would relate how he “broke down” during the meditation recalling some past sad event, something he (or she) thought he had forgotten. At first blush, the memory was powerfully sad, but surprisingly with lovingkindness, he was able to unconditionally forgive that source of pain, and actually felt good, as there was closure finally.

Sometimes, a meditator would use a beautiful memory or imagery to strengthen the feeling of lovingkindness. Due to the calmness arising from the earlier sitting of breath meditation, he found such an image so strongly blissful that joyful tears would stream from his eyes.

For those who are experiencing this bliss of lovingkindness for the first time, it can be an earth-shaking experience, so to speak. Sometimes they wonder if it is all right to feel so blissful. Of course it is, that is what lovingkindness meditation (and the breath meditation, too) is about. It is about joy, zest and mental focus.

I suspect many people do try lovingkindness meditation by themselves without any teacher. And they have experienced such bliss or profound calm. But without some level of wisdom, they might fear these wonderful experiences, or simply do not know the value of such states. This is where a meditation teacher as a spiritual friend helps to strengthen the meditator’s faith and effort in the practice.

Like breath meditation, lovingkindness should be cultivated without any expectation. Simply sit like a fresh beautiful flower in the bright sunlight. Visualize a very happy event (or events) in your life. Re-live the joyful feeling, and do not let the thoughts and details get in the way.

In lovingkindness practice, we feel the blissful states directly, without a thought, without a word. However, where is any distraction, a suitable sentence or two, such as “May I be well!” or “I accept

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myself just as I am!” slowly and sub-verbally said a few time would clear the mind. Then remain totally silent and let the lovingkindness grow.

The Buddha reminds us that cultivating lovingkindness even for a moment is to practise his teaching. For, all good things start with a single thought.

Even if you have no time to sit in meditation, there is one moment in your life you should never neglect in keeping it positive. That is the moment just before falling asleep. As you lie comfortably to end the day, clear your mind of everything else: renounce the world for the night. Tell yourself all those happy thoughts you like: “May I be well, may I be happy, may I be at peace with myself.” and similarly to those who are important to you.

Fall asleep happily, and wake up happily: this will change your life for good. Try it.

4.3 God is Love—And More

25 December is “Buddhist Renewal Day.” The presence of other world religions and their great successes show that human ideas are powerful which can lead or mislead others. Much of the world’s sufferings in the past and today are due to religious wrong views. And this will continue if we do not educate ourselves in true goodness.

I would like to share a very important reflection on the role of Buddha Word in freeing the human mind from oppression, especially religious oppression. We can look at the evolution of human freedom and spiritual liberation as freeing society and the individual from the harmful aspects of the God-belief,

In the Buddha's time, the brahmins used the God-idea and invented the universal soul to control the minds and wealth of the masses. Even then only the four classes of high society were allowed to practise brahmanical religion. The rest were outcastes, outside the privileged tribe. In many important discourses such as the Tevijja Sutta (D 13) and the Alagaddûpama Sutta (M 22), the Buddha clearly speaks out on the falsehood and dangers of such ideas.

Then came the idea of the divine rights of kings, which asserted that kings (and queens) derived from God their absolute power over others and all things. By the 16th and 17th centuries we see the absolute monarchs rampantly abusing their power until Oliver Cromwell's work broke this myth in England. Decades later this inspired the French Revolution similarly to reject royalty using the God-idea to empower themselves and persecute others.

Unfortunately, the white Europeans then saw God as white and used such ideas as an excuse to conquer "lesser" races (the non-Europeans) to bring them to God. This part of our history is so painful that it is understandable that some of us try to be optimistic and point to the benefits that colonialism had brought us. The point is that our forefathers had worked hard to liberate us, and we should be grateful to them.

Today, we still see the God-idea being abused by the terrorists, the mass bombers, the evangelists, and the intolerant teachers. I am deeply pained when I see so much hate in the faces of "God-believers" in the newspapers and violence in his name.

When I began my religious life, I was told by preachers that "God is love." Later I found that this love is a very limited and tribal one. God only loves us if we are the members of a certain group. Otherwise, he will send us to hell, and so on.

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Then I discovered Buddhism, and the Buddha too declares that “God is love.” The Buddha describes the goodness of God so completely, that it is almost impossible to add anything more positive.

God is *lovingkindness*: unconditional love for all beings, divine, human and animal.

God is *compassion*: he helps to make good everyone, no matter how bad—think of Avalokitesvara or Guanyin.

God is *altruistic joy*: he is not dependent on your adoration and worship, but rejoices in your goodness.

Above all, God is *equanimity*: he remains inwardly still no matter what happens in the world—we are accountable for our actions, bad and good.

The most wonderful message the Buddha has given us is that God is not in heaven or out there, but right here within us (the kingdom of God in within us). You are filled with Godliness

when you are full of lovingkindness
and unconditionally accept others;
when you are compassionate to those with problems
or who are not so fortunate;
when you rejoice in the success and goodness of others; and
when you are inwardly still, no matter what happens,
despite the best you have done.

Plant the seeds of goodness, shine them with the light of lovingkindness, water them with compassion, weed and prune them with altruistic joy, and enjoy them with equanimity.

You need not change your religion to follow the Buddha’s teachings. Turn your back from evil; walk towards the good. You will begin to understand the true meaning of whatever good that you believe in.

When you bow low enough, when you close your eyes in stillness, you will see the true God, and he is beyond the wildest dream of any religion or philosophy or holiness. This is the God that none of us can abuse. This God is truly love, light, life and liberation.

Please join me in this universal prayer for world peace and inner stillness. May we rise above all religions to see true reality directly with joy and peace.

4.4 When Love is Truly Blind

[A friend sent me this warm Buddhistic story, which I present with minor editing.]

Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same hospital room.

One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window.

The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back.

The men talked for hours on end. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, their involvement in the military service, where they had been on vacation

Every afternoon, when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window.

The man in the other bed began to live for those one hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside.

The window over looked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color and a fine

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view of the city sky line could be seen in the distance.

As the man by the window described all this in exquisite details, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine this picturesque scene.

One warm afternoon, the man by the window described a parade passing by.

Although the other man could not hear the band, he could see it in his mind's eye as the gentle man by the window portrayed it with descriptive words.

Days, weeks and months passed.

One morning, the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window, who had died peacefully in his sleep.

As soon as it seemed appropriate, the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone.

Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside. He strained to slowly turn to look out the window besides the bed.

It faced a blank wall!

The man asked the nurse what could have compelled his deceased roommate who had described such wonderful things outside this window.

The nurse responded that the man was blind and could not even see the wall.

She said, "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you."

Epilogue:

There is tremendous happiness in making others happy, despite our own situations.

Shared grief is half the sorrow, but happiness when shared, is doubled. If you want to feel rich, just count all the things you have that money can't buy.

"Today" is a gift, that is why it is called "**the Present.**"

4.5 Love Is

To love life is to be the most valuable thing there is:
love not just your body, but feel for your heart,
for, your body may not heed to you,
but your heart stills you in its beat to the last.

To love life is to see others just as you see yourself;
lust, on the other hand, is very private limited;
what you hate in others, you hate in yourself, too.
True love is to hold another's heart in your own,

You cannot love just a part of a person,
for, then you will miss all the rest:
to love the whole person is see another as is,
for, to love is to love fully.

To love someone is to see words as blissful sound,
to speak beautifully is to feel what you say,
to feel what you say is to hear with your heart,
and your heart will breathe an open space.

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To love is to blossom like a sweet flower,
its roots in the dirt, its face in the light;
it is most beautiful just as it is,
always there whatever the weather,

Love is giving and forgiving,
always meeting for the first time,
love is more than just presents:
it is the moment that passes so quickly.

Above all, love is a spacious silence,
without which there is no music,
the healing stillness between breaths
that you feel only in letting go.

4.6 Who Really is Guanyin?

Throughout my life, I have had a number of personal experiences of Guanyin. Such Guanyin encounters strongly reinforce my faith in Dharma-moved compassion. Of course, I am not alone in such experiences. In fact, in one of my public talks, a Catholic woman came up to me and privately confessed to me that although she was brought up as Christian, she kept having visions and dreams of Guanyin. What shall I do? She asked. Sadhu! I said, you have the best of two worlds!

Compassion has many manifestations and appears to everyone at the right time. Let me begin with the more mundane ones. Once as a monk, I was caught in a heavy downpour, and invoked Guanyin to stop the rain so that I could return to my vihara. The rain fell heavier! I thought I had lost my faith. Then a car drove up to me, and the driver asked, "Would you like a lift back?" While in the dry car, I reflected: one puny human wanted the whole sky to stop rain-

ing just for him to cross the road, but Guanyin was wiser in his compassion!

On another occasion, I was buying books in a Buddhist bookshop, and had selected quite a pile of books, left on the cashier's counter. I was still browsing for more books, when, in the corner of my eye, I noticed a woman in white (like a vegetarian lay practitioner), came in and walked out. When I finally went to the counter to pay for the books, the cashier said that they all have been paid for by the lady in white! And she did not know who that white lady was!

Another encounter. After giving a talk at a Malaysian university, I was driven back to the vihara by one of my students. Halfway along the dark highway (it was about 11 pm), the car suddenly stalled! My student had forgotten to top up the petrol. So we are stuck by the lonely highway with vehicles zooming by. It is understandable that no one stopped, seeing a group of young people with a bald man dressed in a blanket (I was still a monk then).

Then someone on a Honda Cub stopped and we told him of our predicament. He said he would try to help us, and scooted off. Half an hour passed, and we also forgotten about this passerby. And then a bike stopped by again: it was the same man and he handed us a container of petrol! Before we could pay him or even thank him, he scooted off again into the night.

One of my most dramatic encounters with Guanyin was when I was running a Buddhist retreat for a group of NUS medical students (in the 1980s) in the National Park, Malaysia. We were on a jungle walk at Lata Berkoh, and came to a nearly dry river bed, narrowed down to a channel of powerful rushing water just too wide for anyone of us to jump across. So I told those students who could swim to push a fallen tree trunk across it so that we could walk across on it.

Once in the water, the trunk was immediately dragged by the currents into the deep pool downriver, along with all the four boys!

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Three of them swam back to safety, but the fourth was seen clinging to the trunk. The trunk rolled over a couple of times, and the boy disappeared into the water, both slowly moving farther away. Standing on the bank, I could only helplessly watch and invoke Guanyin while the other boys jumped in again to save him.

After the boy was brought to safety, I spoke to him, telling him how I had feared for his life. Then he told me a remarkable thing: he said that he actually felt very peaceful under the water, and did not feel like coming up again! He felt just like letting go of everything. Then a radiant lady in white appeared above him (in the water) with outstretched hands. And he found himself on the water surface again!

These are encounters of faith, and are not easy to explain in words. But I often like to say that if you give compassion a chance in your life, you will be well rewarded by it. Compassion has no religion, no race, and no borders: it is boundless. Its presence reflects our being at our spiritual best, reminding us that we are capable of spiritual liberation. For Guanyin is that great compassion in our hearts. (I tell the God-believers who attend my classes that “this is the Kingdom of God within us.”)

It is not important for us to have such dramatic experiences. In fact, if such experiences are misunderstood, we can feel proud or self-righteous about them. We should be humbled by them, and be reminded of the uncertainty and frailty of life, and not to take others (especially our near and dear ones) for granted.

For me, these are now memories, but powerful and happy memories that serve as great starters for the cultivation of loving-kindness. I invite you forget about all the pains that others have done to you, but to remember all the happy and precious moments you have encountered. These happy memories, not the negative ones, will best heal and help you become a better person.

4.7 The Chickduck

The Jātaka are full of stories of wit and wisdom. Most of these stories are ancient folk tales. In SE Asia we even have new Jātaka tales written probably in northern Myanmar or northern Thailand (the area was the same in ancient times). Now I'm going to write (or rewrite) one such story which talks of true love.

One day, in Tāvātimsa, when Shakra, lord of the devas, felt really bored with the devas and devis, he decided to spend some quiet time on earth. He went down to a beautiful park, something like the McRitchie reservoir area.

He was just beginning to relax under a jambu tree when he saw a couple walking together nearby. As Shakra was often in love himself before, he was curious whether the couple really loved one another. (He was invisible to earthlings, so the couple could not see him.)

So Shakra projected a hologram of a divine chickduck, which looked like a chicken but quacked like a duck! It waddled along far in front of the couple, just enough for them to see and hear it.

The wife, who had good eyes, said, "It's a chicken!"

"No!" said the husband, who had good ears, "It's a duck!"

They went on arguing: every time the chickduck flapped its wings, the wife said, "It's a chicken!" Every time the chickduck quacked, the husband said, "It's a duck!"

But every time the couple were silent, they saw the chickduck slowing down, so that they had a better view of it. So they became more silent, and finally, they clearly saw this most wonderful bird that Shakra had projected in virtual reality.

"You're right, dear," said the wife, hearing it quacked, "It's a duck!"

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“You’re right, too, dear,” said the husband, seeing it more clearly, “It’s a chicken!”

Lord Shakra was delighted with the couple. Disguising himself as a National Parks guide, he, sternly but with a smile, told the couple that night was falling, and that they should go home right away and spend quality time together. As soon as they turned their back, he vanished and reappeared in Tāvātimsa, happy with his good deed for the day.

(Note: Shakra’s next good deed will only happen in about 80 years’ time. Well, that’s how long a Tavatimsa day is compared to the earthly one.)

Moral:

Love grows when one spouse tries to see things from other’s viewpoint, seriously.

Or, you can try your luck taking a walk in McRitchie Reservoir Park.

But beware, when Shakra is not around, it could be Māra who has projected a shape-shifting bird. It becomes whatever you want it to be. So if you think it is a duck, it *is* a duck. If you think it is a *chicken*, it is a chicken. This leads to endless quarrels, separations and divorces. The sad thing is that *both* are right, but we do not appreciate the other loved one’s viewpoint. The other problem is that, unlike Shakra, Māra is always around, especially when we are angry or suspicious of our loved one!

4.8 The Ghosts Amongst Us

Some kinds of ghosts can really harm us if we are not careful. For example, when we are walking home from work in the dark, and suddenly out of nowhere this bicycle rider, dark and silent, swoosh just a hair’s breadth from you.

You also see them in the trains: they stand at the doors and wait. The moment the doors open, they rush in as if there is no one coming out from the train. In fact, they do not see others, as they are from another realm: they are the real ghosts that we meet in real life.

Or, we see them in gatherings, their faces dark and unsmiling. Silently they brush by you as if you are not there. In fact, they are not able to see you, as they are only looking for their own kind.

There is one good way you can help such suffering beings: show them your lovingkindness and smile in your heart at them.

Above all, do not mirror them: that is a sure way of becoming a ghost, too!

4.9 The Temple of God is Within Us

The biggest mistake people make about religion is that they think it is about God, god or gods. Such ideas make interesting stories, which can be useful in helping some of us, especially in the training of the young and growing up, about ethical and good conduct.

The danger, however, is very real when we mistake a story (no matter how great the story is) for reality. The main difficulty with stories is that they are language-based: they are communicated through words. And people put their own meanings to words, and so begins politics.

The God-idea is the most politicized of human ideas. The reason is simple: it is a good way to control others and resources. People are compared to sheep, fishes or crops to be “harvested.” Even after the days of colonialism, the idea of colonizing the minds and bodies of others continue to trouble us through the God religions of today.

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If only God could right now appear in the sky or on our global internet and address us all. Then again I don't think people will listen to him anyway. For he is unlikely to be like anyone or anything we have defined or described.

The Buddha knows (some 2600 years ago) the problems with God-ideas and related ideologies. He often speaks against them. In his own stories, the Buddha often presents God (or Brahma as he is called then) very differently from the way the "power-mode" people define him.

Most Buddhists can understand and accept the notion that "God is love." This notion is a universal one and does not belong to any religion, and this is important. We are not talking statistics here, but about being human, and then being divine ourselves.

A short remarkable sutta records how Brahma compassionately comes down from his heaven and tells a devotee (the mother of the monk Brahma,deva) not to make offerings to him (Brahmā), because heavenly beings neither need nor can take earthly food! Furthermore, says Brahmā, it is more meritorious to offer that food to the monk Brahma,deva!

The temple of God is within us, so let us not look outside. This is the message we should give to others who are God-believers and who wonder if they can also be Buddhists.

Tell your God-loving friends, first reflect on the love, compassion, joy and equanimity of God. (This is called Devatā'nussati.) Then, when the mind is peaceful and loving, go on to do breath meditation, and feel even a deeper stillness.

5 MORAL VIRTUE

5.1 Say No, Say Yes, Be Silent

A very simple approach to Buddhist practice is this threefold training:

- (1) Say no,
- (2) Say yes,
- (3) Be silent.

Buddhist training begins by our learning to say *no*, that is,

- (1) No to harming life and living beings;
- (2) No to taking the not-given;
- (3) No to disrespecting the body of others and our own;
- (4) No to falsehood and deception;
- (5) No to anything addictive (drinking, gambling, etc).

Whether you recite the precepts or not, karma still works on you. The precepts remind us that life can be even more fun when we follow these rules. What is football, or any sports, without the rules?

We should say *no* to the evangelists because they are close-minded, and often have serious emotional problems of wanting to dominate others.

We should say *no* to mental distractions. In fact, this is the essence of meditation practice for beginners. Just keep bringing the mind back to the meditation object, gently and with kindness.

Say *yes* to lovingkindness and happiness: Keep watching your breath: it's the only one you have. Heal your own mind: it's the only one you can really heal.

5 Moral virtue

When we were kids, many of us sucked our thumbs. One day, we see it as all red, swollen and wrinkled. We lose all desire to suck it any more.

When we have negative habits, we are in another way sucking our thumb again. When we look carefully, we will see the redness, the swell, and the wrinkles.

Whenever you can, simply be silent, and let the stillness reveals the wonders of your inner goodness and strengths you may not realize you have.

The Buddha is constantly reminding us to look for our inner strength. From the time of his awakening to the final nirvana.

5.2 Learn to Say “no!”

The Buddhist life is sometimes said to comprise the three trainings: training in moral virtue, training in mental concentration and training in wisdom. Training in moral virtue is basically the restraining and refining of our bodily actions and speech. Mental training is that of letting go of mental distractions so that it is focused with inner stillness. And training in wisdom deals with overcoming wrong views.

Another way of looking at the three trainings has to do with knowing when to say ‘yes’ and when to say ‘no’. The three trainings then can be said to be learning to say ‘yes’, learning to say ‘no’, and learning to be silent. In *moral training*, we learn to say *no* to various unwholesome actions (that is, keeping to the Five Precepts). In *mental cultivation*, we train in joy to support our meditation. And in *wisdom training*, we discover the nature of true reality that is beyond words.

Buddhist living begins by our learning to say “no,” that is, no to harming life, no to taking the not-given, no to sexual misconduct, no to falsehood, and no to drunkenness and addiction. For the sake of mental cultivation and inner peace, we must be courageous to say “No!” to the close-minded evangelists who try to force their unwholesome views upon us.

Mental cultivation begins with saying ‘yes’ to your inner goodness. We make every effort to remember our happy days and goodness within us, and the happiness and goodness that others have shown us. Negative thoughts easily shadow us uninvited. We need to make extra effort to brighten our lives with happy memories and faith in goodness.

Even if we think that the “real” world is cruel and unjust, we should spend quiet time to remind ourselves that our own goodness is its own reward. If we learn to be happy with our inner stillness then we are not dependent on external stimulation for our happiness. We are emotionally independent, at peace with ourselves.

To be emotionally independent is to be like the gentle green grass that bends with the wind, only to rise up again in the sunshine when the storm is over. These winds are called gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and obscurity, happiness and sorrow.

To train in wisdom is to see impermanence in all things, bad or good. When bad things happen to us, remind ourselves that they are impermanent. That way, we learn not to “own” the pain: we let go of suffering. When good things happen to us, we remind ourselves they are impermanent; so we value them more and learn to be better from them.

When we are wise in saying ‘no’ at the right time, we refuse to run our lives by other people’s rules and expectations. When we are wise in saying ‘yes’ at the right time, we empower ourselves to touch the best in us and to benefit others. Most importantly, there

5 Moral virtue

are times to be simply silent, so that we can truly know ourselves and be truly free.

5.3 The Five Precepts are Universal

Whether we recite the Five Precepts or not, whether we are Buddhist or not, whether we believe or not, their karmic effects still work on us. This is because the Five Precepts are based on “natural morality.” Natural morality refers to the way of things we see in the universe.

The first precept is against killing, that is, the respect for life. All living beings value life. We don't even need religion to tell us this. No one invented this truth; it is always there. It is a natural truth.

The second precept is against stealing, that is, not taking what is not given. We all have to work for a living, or we are supported by others who work for a living. Through industry and honesty, we earn our supports for life. If someone were to take this away, it would bring us suffering. When we steal from someone, we are effectively and wrongfully taking away his happiness. This applies to all human beings. It is a natural truth.

The third precept is against sexual misconduct, that is, we should not disrespect the body. We do not like others to do what they like with our body. This is also true of everyone else. In other words, we naturally want others to respect us when we say “No.” This is our natural freedom. When we rape, abuse or kidnap someone (for example), we are taking away that person's freedom. That person suffers pain.

The fourth precept is against falsehood, against communicating what is untrue, harsh, disharmonious and useless. This is again something natural: if there is no truth, then it is no use of my

writing about all this. You would have wasted your time reading this! Truth is the very basis of wholesome human communication.

The fifth precept is against taking anything intoxicative or addictive, such as drinks. The aim here is not to cloud our minds or lose self-control, which will then make it easier for us to break any or all of the previous four precepts. For we have difficulty keeping this precept, we must know how to stop before we get drunk. This fifth precept is like a door leading to mental cultivation or meditation. If our mind is clear, then it is easier to cultivate it.

Reciting the precepts is a good way of reminding ourselves to have greater resolve to keep them. However, when we break any precept, we should not feel guilty, as this is not a commandment, but they are more like the rules of a game. If we break the rules of football, for example, then it is no more fun to play the game.

If we have broken a precept, then we should examine the conditions that caused us to do so. We should work at reducing or removing those conditions. This is what the precepts are about: removing the negative conditions, and becoming happier people.

The Five Precepts are the minimum standards of being human. They are the quality control for our human life. When we keep our precepts well, we will never be reborn in subhuman states (as an animal, a ghost, an asura, or hell-being).

Through keeping the precepts, our good works become truly effective. We are not merely *showing* that we are good: we *are* really good. Through our moral virtue, we will see heaven here and now, and it is easier to become a streamwinner.

6 MEDITATION

6.1 Failure and Giving Up

I was invited to give a meditation demo to a group of school teachers, and the person who invited me to do this gently warned me that some of them might walk out halfway as they were new to meditation.

The point is that we tend to judge things at first blush. But more often than not, we tend to give up when we find something (like meditation) is difficult. Sometimes we might even blame the method itself or the teacher (perhaps his looks, race, or even dress).

In fact, it is these people with such thoughts who really need meditation more than anyone else. So the meditation teacher needs to use every skill to “sell” the idea that they can meditation so that they will suspend all prejudgements and give themselves a chance.

A secret about meditation is this: there is really no such thing as failure, except for giving up.

The mind has a way of lying to itself, and does this in the most elaborate and convincing way.

6.2 How Mindfulness Strengthens Us

At the end of a meditation sitting, I always tell the class to “review your practice,” like what the forest monks do, too. To review your practise is basically to recall the peace, joy or focus you felt, even for an instant, during the meditation. The idea is not to “think” but to “feel” it, and to remember it.

This way, as more and more happy thoughts build up in us, our negative thoughts are displaced, and have less chances of controlling and autopilotting us through negative habits.

Dhyana (Pali *jhāna*) is great if you can attain it (it's like running as a marathon or sporting in the Olympics). But, you need not get into dhyana to be happy. Sometimes people take dhyana like some kind of championship medal, and keep training for it, as it were, so that they forget to “enjoy” (en-joy, feel the joy) of the sitting in the present moment.

In meditation, the journey itself is the destination. Or, another way of putting it, we simply learn to walk by walking.

The idea of meditating is to *enjoy* the present-moment awareness. This easier when you make extra effort to let go of thoughts about your work, your relationships, your religion, and most of all, about your self. In other words, you begin to meditate by simply forgetting about your self, about the past or the future.

A very simple way to meditate is to imagine yourself to be a security guard of a very high-security building. You have six monitors (your six senses), and you look carefully at each of them, one at a time. The interesting thing here is you remove the difficulty or danger simply by paying close attention to it, that's all. And you must not move away from the safety of your seat.

You see something on the *eye* monitor:
“just looking, just looking”; let it come, let it go.

You hear something on the *ear* monitor:
“sound, sound”; let it come, let it go.

You smell something on the *nose* monitor:
“smelling, smelling”; let it come, let it go.

You taste something on the *tongue* monitor:
“tasting, tasting”; let it come, let it go.

6 Meditation

You feel something on the *body* monitor:
“feeling, feeling”; let it come, let it go.

You experience a thought on the *mind* monitor:
“thinking, thinking”; let it come, let it go.

Every time your attention wanders, immediately bring it back to the breath (if you are doing breath meditation). After doing this for a while, you will notice your breath becoming more relaxed and slower: you need less oxygen, you burning up or decaying more slowly, as it were! (Notice how much oxygen you burn when you get angry.)

As you breathe more calmly, you will notice gaps or spaces between your breaths. In-breath...a gap...out-breath...a gap... and so on. These are *spaces of stillness*, the source of inner joy and higher creativity. This is the silence between the musical notes of life.

Keep watching these still spaces in between your breaths, and a wonderful stillness will arise in you.

While the storm rages in the world around us, may we find joyful stillness in the centre of our breaths.

Whatever religion you follow, you will find that this stillness helps you know yourself better. I share this with you out of immeasurable lovingkindness and for a more peaceful productive society.

The highest religion is *true inner stillness*.

6.3 Meditation Goes Beyond the Brain

Scientists now know that meditation is healthy for your brain and your body, but Buddhists know that meditation is good for your whole being.

We have a triune (three-in-one) brain: the lizard brain (the spinal bulb), the dog brain (the limbic system) and the human brain (the neo-cortex, the largest part of the brain).

The lizard brain controls our breath, vision and body movements, and arouses sexual feelings, pulls us away from danger and makes us want to control our surrounding. With **breath meditation**, our breath and heartbeat slow down, calming the lizard brain. We become more physically relaxed.

The dog brain experiences emotions, such as love, and other feelings. **The cultivation of lovingkindness** enriches and extends this area of our being, allowing more trust and joy beyond ourselves.

The human brain or neo-cortex deals with language and reason. It makes music, poetry, and beautiful things possible. It also deals with reason. This is where our worries arise from as it were.

When we combine **a healthy balance of breath meditation and lovingkindness**, harmonizing our head with our heart, all the three levels of the brain are harmonized. We become more than the sum of our physical parts.

The dog brain tends to be stuck in the past, remembering old things, and the human brain tends to look ahead, often remaining stuck in the non-existent future. So if we are only brain-centred, we are neither here nor there most of the time.

When the whole brain and the body are unified in a single thought, such as the joyful breath, then we are in **the present moment**, the only reality we can ever know.

Try this simple experiment: sit quietly and simply watch your breath until it is very gentle and slow with gaps of no-breath in between. Notice how peaceful those breath-gaps are.

6 Meditation

If you wish to read more about the triune brain, see this website (thanks, Yew Thong for the information): http://www.thebiggest-ideas.com/cgi-bin/viewps.cgi?you_have_three_brainsps.txt

6.4 Timelessness and Meditation

One of the most mysterious aspects of the Dharma is that it is “timeless” (*akālika*). This interesting quality can be experienced “here and now” (*sandiṭṭhika*), and we are to “come and see” (*ehi passika*) it for ourselves.

When we are troubled by things we do not like, we wish time would move faster. When we are enjoying something, we feel as if it is too short a time. But when we are really enjoying something, especially when we are joyful, it feels like forever. This is because we have touched the present moment.

Present-moment awareness can be cultivated. All we need to do is close our eyes and focus on something going on in the body, say, the breath. The first thing we might notice is that some thoughts are dancing in our minds.

Some of these thoughts are from the past: What did I today? I should have done that ages ago. Why did I not do this thing? And so on. Other thoughts are about the future: What will I do after this? I will do this and this later. This person has not returned my call. And so on. We are not in the present moment at all.

We need to return to the present moment where we really are: we need to return to the breath. We can begin by simply noting the “in” and “out” of the breath with these two words. As we become more focussed on the breath, simply know it is coming in, simply know it is going out.

If we hear a sound, know it, let it go. Do not comment on it, do not add anything. Let it come, let it go. If a thought arises, know it, let it come, let it go in the same manner.

Pain and discomfort can be a wonderful teacher. Pain is a natural thing because we have a body. Physical pain can be removed by a small adjustment in the way we sit. So if we assume a good posture right from the start, we need not move at all right through the meditation.

How does bodily pain become mental pain? When we “own” it: we complain “I” am feeling this pain; it is hurting “me,” “my” body is suffering. We are thinking, not meditating.

How do we learn from pain? First acknowledge it: this is pain (numbness, discomfort, a tic). Observe it for what it is: it rises, peaks, and falls away. It may go on for a while, but it will sooner or later stop. Pain is impermanent.

If we can do this, then we are experiencing inner peace for ourselves. No one can do this for us. Wisdom arises through the persistence in watching impermanence in all our actions. As such, true reality arises to the wise (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*), without any help from others.

This wisdom gives us access (*opanayika*) to inner peace that frees us from the ideas of evil, sin, fear, anger, and other negative emotions. The most wonderful thing about such a spiritual exercise is that we are in charge. No dogma, no belief, no worship, no religion: just the present moment of stillness.

Meditation shows us how thoughts (both ours and others) control us, and how to let go of them. We begin to truly feel, and then we let go of that feeling, too. We begin to know directly a sense of profound peace. There is nothing more to know, but this blissful peace that is energizing, empowering and liberating.

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Thus the Buddha Dharma is well taught (*svākkhāta*). It is up to us to seek within ourselves that true peace and joy. (You might like to read this from the start again so that you know what to do, if not already.)

You have also reflected on the six qualities of the Buddha Dharma.

6.5 Something to Sit on

Many people still have an extreme view about meditation. Some think it is magical; others think it is intellectual headwork. In fact, there are more meditation “experts” today than ever before, but they could hardly remain silent for a minute or sit still for a moment.

If we accept the early Suttas as authentic teachings of the Buddha, then we must say that meditation involves both body and mind. And it is hard work, at least for the beginner. But I like to tell my students to recall how a toddler learns to walk. It simply never gives up. The toddler first tries to stand, it falls, it gets up again, falls, up again, and so on until it can really walk.

We were each that infant once. Now we can run if we want to. But it is time to learn to *sit* in the deepest sense of the word. That is, to sit in deep stillness, delving into the stillness and clarity of our minds.

We love to listen to good and famous speakers talk about meditation, but it is even better if we close our own eyes and see more of ourselves. We have heard of the three monkeys: one closes its eyes, the second its ears, and the third its mouth. Meditation however begins with the taming of the six monkeys: we see less, hear less, smell less, taste less, and touch less.

We temporarily shut down the five physical sense-doors so that we can totally focus on the mind, the controller of the sense-doors. As Lewis Lancaster, a professor of Buddhist studies, once said, "Since pain originates from the senses, it is possible to control it through mental and physical methods."

The body needs to be stilled first before we can still the mind. For this reason, early Buddhism insists on personal moral virtue (the five precepts), that is, our body and speech must be harmonious first.

Most teachers would begin meditation instructions by showing their students how to sit properly. My favourite imagery is that of a hen hatching her eggs. Imagine you are a hen sitting over some eggs. First the hen shuffles herself about a bit until she finds just the right posture. Then she sits totally still. After a while, she would turn her eggs around, and then sit again, and so on, for as long as needed to hatch the eggs.

Once our body is still, we begin to deal with our thoughts. This is mostly letting go of thinking about the past, or planning for the future. At first, while meditating, we may recall some past events, or plan what to do after the meditation. This is a mild form of worrying: when we worry we are thinking of the past or the future.

This is called worry because there is nothing we can really do about the past: it is gone; we can plan for the future, but it will take its own course anyway. The point is that while delving into the past or the future, we are neglecting the present, which is the only reality there is (for meditation purposes, anyway).

One of the best ways of keeping our minds in sync with the present moment is to watch the breath. (The Buddha himself did this when he was only seven; so, breath meditation is safe for children. He used the same method to awaken to Buddhahood; so, it is the best method we can use for spiritual liberation.)

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The idea is very simple: keep your attention gently but firmly anchored to your breath. This is unlikely to happen at first. So whenever the mind wanders off or some distraction (a thought, a sound, a smell, or discomfort) intrudes, simply bring your attention back to watching the breath. Remember the infant learning to walk?

On the other hand, you might surprise yourself how easily you settle into a beautiful inner stillness, especially when you are meditating in a quiet and conducive place. (Oh yes, make sure you switch off that hand-phone first, unless you are already an expert meditator.) How long you sit does not matter, but make it a habit of naturally going into watching and stilling your breath whenever you can.

If you still find all this difficult, then it would be good to look for a proper meditation teacher (one you feel happy meditating with). And if you are progressing well, and wish to improve your meditation, you should find a spiritual friend in a meditation teacher so that you go even further.

Meditation is like learning to play great music: you must master the instrument (the mind), and a maestro can help you do this better. But you must yourself practise. The most beautiful music comes from the silence of our minds. Let us sit on it.

In a number of suttas, the Buddha reminds us:

“Whatever a teacher should do out of compassion
for the good of disciples,
for the sake of their welfare,
it has been done to you by me.

These are the foot of trees; these are empty houses.
Meditate! Be not heedless! Regret not later!
This is our instruction to you.”

(eg Kāya Sutta, S 43.1/4:359) = SD 12.21

6.6 Two Kinds of Pain

The Buddha's teachings began in the depths of human mind. The Buddha, in his quest to understand the nature and ending of suffering, discovered that there are two kinds of pain: bodily pain and mental pain.

Bodily pains arise due to the physical nature of the body. Just as the body is impermanent, bodily pain, too, is impermanent. Mental pain, on the other hand, is a projected pain. We magnified and colour the dissatisfactions and unsatisfactoriness that we experience through our physical senses.

In other words, we do not only perceive (experience) through our physical senses and feel pain and pleasure, but we also conceive (give rise to) notions of pain and pleasure. In simple terms, the Buddha discovered that he can simply leave bodily pains at the body level, and not allowing them to reach his mind.

This vital wisdom is crystallized in his teaching to the infirm elder Nakula, pita, that he should constantly reflect thus:

"My body may be sick; let not my mind be sick." (S 22.1)³

This brief teaching was elaborated to Nākula, pitā as the practice of the four focusses of mindfulness. Here I shall restate them in simple terms:

(1) The Recollection of the Body. Find time to simply be aware of your body. Notice that there are solid earth-like parts of our body. It mostly comprises of the water element. This body produces heat; it is actually burning, on fire: in other words, decaying! Our body is constantly moving in some way, tiny movements, great movements: yet it is like a life-size balloon that is rising and falling with air. The

³ Nakula, pita Sutta (S 22.1 = SD 5.4).

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more you learn to watch this air, this breath, the more peaceful it becomes.

(2) The Recollection of Feeling. Our body is physical: it is resistant in some ways. If we sit too long, we fill discomfort; so too if we stand too long, or walk too long, or lie down too long. So we constantly change our postures. We experience feelings, that is, pleasure, pain and neutral feelings. We feel pleasure when we like something, but when we have it too long, we become bored with it: pleasure becomes pain. Or when we miss that pleasure, we feel pain. Hence pleasure is the cause of pain. Neutral feeling is like what your body is feeling as you read this (the body feels neither pleasure nor pain). But this neutral feeling, too, is impermanent.

(3) The Recollection of Mind. As your mind becomes more calm and clear, you begin to understand how words and thoughts, even good ones, are really distracting. How beautifully peaceful it is when the mind is totally free from words and thought, even for a moment. The unawakened mind can never be totally empty; it is like a monkey swinging from tree to tree, always looking for a branch to cling to and move around. The best way to still our minds is to *feel* the joy and peace as they arise in our mind, that is, to experience them directly without any words or thought. This is easier done than said!

(4) The Recollection of Dharmas. Silent mind, holy mind. As the mind become more calm and clear, we begin to catch glimpses of true reality. We begin to understand who or what we really are. We begin to understand better how our mind is distracted, and how to let go of distractions and defilements. And as we keep these four spiritual exercises, we become better at it, working ourselves to self-liberation.

Meantime, let us remind ourselves with these practices:

Look less,	see more.
Hear less,	listen more.
Smell less,	breathe more.
Eat less,	taste more.
Touch less,	feel more.
Think less,	mind more.

6.7 To Live is to Feel

We tend to think too much. We think about religion, about work, about money, about people, about sex. We think about ourselves. We think about others. Thinking invariably leads to ugly stress.

I say “invariably” because whatever we think about never turns out to be really true. Of course, you might rebut, I remember I was right that time about that thing about that person. Well, you were “right,” because what you thought later fitted with what you had thought earlier. So you thought you were right.

We like to *think* we are right: My idea is right; my opinion is right; my suggestion is the best; I am right; I am the best. The bottom line is that thinking is often about “I, me or mine.”

For most people, there is always an “I” behind the thinking. The Buddha teaches us to remove the “I, me, mine” behind the thinking. Try this:

Instead of thinking, “I am right,” say “Why is this idea so important to me?” Instead of saying, “He hurt *my* feelings,” seek “What is this really about?” Instead of claiming, “All this is *mine*,” ask “So what? Really!”

What’s so bad about thinking? It involves words. Thinking is to put what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and feel into words.

6 Meditation

*But words about seeing is not seeing.
We cannot summarize the sunset into words.
Words about music is not music.
Nor are thoughts about music.
Words about a flower's fragrance totally loses its fragrance.
Words about the taste of food never fills the belly.
Words about how we feel is not really how we feel.
Words about how we think often hide the real thing.
Words escape the mouth but imprison the mind.
The word is not the thing.*

A first rule of Buddhist meditation is to still the body and speech. We are told by the meditation teacher to first sit comfortably still and keep silent. A calm body and a closed mouth conduce to a still mind. We have begun to meditate. Just, that is.

Even if we were to hold our body still in a temperature-regulated aerated fibre-glass body-glove and to tape our mouths, we still cannot really silence the mind.

Why is it so difficult to silence the mind? Well, this is what I have been trying to write about all this while. We think too much!

But you are writing this! You rebut; these are *words*! You are right, these are words, but they are words with *feelings*. They are not perfect (no word is), I admit, but let us see them as a finger pointing to the moon. You can really see this moon only if you truly feel.

To *feel* is to experience life directly.

What you see is	what you get.
What you hear is	what you get.
What you smell is	what you get.
What you taste is	what you get.
What you feel is	what you get.
What you mind is	what you get.

To feel is to *live* the present moment of the visual forms, the sounds, the smells, the tastes, the touches, the feelings and the thoughts, and simply see them for what they are.

To feel is to *love* the present moment, to see the other person as he or she is, to accept it unconditionally, to take a situation for what it really *is*. And not to paste the past onto it, nor shove it into the future.

Live in the past, you are dead.

Dream into the future, you are not born.

Be present! You are gifted.

For all you really ever have is the present. Let go of the thoughts (they are always about the past or the future). Feel the moment. Know it for what it is... You will know what to do next.

6.8 Unchained Peace

There are moments in my life I do not feel like doing anything,
but just to be still,
not even writing something like this (but it comes).

You *see* someone
and feel how wonderful that person is,
going about his business.

May his pains and wishes not blur out the joy that is his life,
May he see the beauty of inner peace.
This is how artists are born.

You *hear* someone
and feel how beautiful his sound or voice is.
Just to be able to hear clearly, how we take it for granted,
and to be able to make happy sense
of whatever sounds we hear.

6 Meditation

All sounds are impermanent yet beautiful.
This is how musicians are born.

You *smell* a sweet smell,
and feel like a fragrant flower bursting from the earth,
bringing together water, fire and wind,
making the world beautiful and healthy.
No need to think or talk, just flower.
This is how poets are born.

You *taste* the first mouthful of plain rice or bread:
how sweet it tastes
 before the other flavours crowd your tongue.
It's like meeting someone you truly love for the first time.
This is how you fall in love.

You *feel* the touch of one you love.
You have no love till you give it away.
Every breath counts, so breathe with love
to yourself, others and all around,
just as the warm sun-light shines on all alike.
This is how we meditate.

Passing *thoughts* cross your mind.
Smile gratefully at your past: let it come, let it go;
They are like roots that give the tree
so that it flowers and fruits, and gives cool shade.
Let the future grow like a seed cast far from the tree's shadows,
so that it will grow into its own.
This is how you become truly happy.

You are just *right* how you are:
notice the joy as joy,
the pain as pain, the desire as desire, the hate as hate,
the delusion as delusion, the fear as fear,
the emptiness as emptiness.

They are lost wanderers: smile at them, let them move on.
Then you will know whence and how they came.
The past is gone, you will tire to dig it up,
The future has not yet come, you will be restless to run after it:
Only the *present* is here, welcome it.
Live the moment, and you live well:
You are meant to be happy.

6.9 Lesson from a Flower

Look at the flower growing beautifully
but it is impermanent, and will soon wilt
to return to earth, water, fire and wind
that it has arisen from, like every thing else.

A clever man comes along and sees the flower
and makes a replica of it in plastic.
It's more lasting, more than a life-time, in fact,
so he has become the flower's creator.

But what is he looking for in such a flower:
Beauty? Permanence? Control? Technology?
Perhaps all of these and more,
yet he's done nothing but rearrange elements.

For the living flower and the plastic flower
are the same, both made of the elements,
they are earth, water, fire, wind, and space,
the flower and we rise from the same space

Like the flower, we too return to the elements:
we are both changing and impermanent.
The universe is in the flower,
And the flower in the universe.

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We are each of us that flower
when we look at it or see it in the mind's eye.
We are the flower when we hear the bees,
coming for pollen in the flower.

We are that flower when we smell it;
we are that flower when we taste the rain
we are that flower when the wind touches us,
and when the sun shines warmly on us.

The flower and us, we stand on common ground;
The earth's compassion smiles as the flower,
even so our goodness beautifies this world,
filling it with a healing fragrance for all.

Sit with the flower the next time you meet her,
for, she has this eternal message for you,
that all things must move on in life's journey;
for, this will give you true strength to move on, too.

7 SPIRITUAL HAPPINESS

7.1 Nothing is Worth Clinging To

Every week in response to my Dharma message, various individuals would email me telling how happy or inspired they feel. A few see deep connections between my message and their personal difficulties. This reflection is in response to a common response.

Whatever that troubles us or makes us unhappy is mostly the result both past karma and present conditions. Going deeper, we can say that the pains we feel are not really caused by others, but arise through our own ignorance, greed, or hate, or delusion.

We are what we choose to remember. If we choose to remember unhappy things, we will be unhappy, even destructive. If we choose to remember happy things, we will be happy and creative.

Suppose, I have translated all these Suttas and written all these essays, and put them into CDs and online. Although Pali Suttas are not copyrighted, the translations are, and suppose there are those who use these translations, even putting their names to them, so that they get the recognition or profit for it.

Should this stop me from working on the translation? We should never allow negative people or those who take advantage of us to control our moods and life, and do what we do best.

Suppose I am running a small Dharma centre, and some people won't join us because it is a small and simple centre, does it mean I have failed? The point is that those who do join us are really sincere seekers because they do not come for the size, comfort or beauty of buildings.

Or suppose I badly need financial support to do something I deeply believe in, and those whom I have helped, or those who say they would help, or those who can afford it, do not help. Should I be disappointed? The truth is that they have other commitments or that they have not really learned to give. But, then look at those who have been kind and generous to us. They are the ones we should joyfully remember; they are the ones who will benefit from our meditation.

Sometimes we lose something or someone we dearly love. If we hold on to the idea of a "thing" or a "person," then we will be deeply hurt for a long time. We might even turn to religion for the wrong reasons and see it in the wrong light. The point is that we have mentally constructed what or whom we love or hate.

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When we lose someone that we dearly love, it does *not* mean that we have lost “someone” special, but that we have a great capacity for love. If we do not stop loving, then we will find an even greater love. If we reflect on the good things in our lives, we will notice that they are good because we have let go of a loss or pain, and so we allow something better into your lives.

When something bad happens to us, and we let it go, something very much better will replace it. My point is that what we learn of ourselves, the good that we know, cannot be taken away. It will enrich us in a very great way. With every failure, we are better and wiser.

In the Pacala Sutta (A 7.58), the Buddha tells Moggallāna, “Nothing is worth clinging to.”⁴

If we understand nothing is worth clinging to, and move on with happiness, whatever we do next will be even better. This gives us an inner sense of satisfaction and happiness. And no one can take that away.

We suffer pain when we depend on external things and others for recognition and happiness. Meditation trains us to be happy within without relying on others and external things. When we are truly happy, we can give more and true happiness to others.

7.2 Questions That Answer

We are facing a global financial crisis. The experts with their theories are wrong after all. Often it takes longer to prove an expert wrong; an average thinking person is likely to learn faster.

⁴ See section 11 of Pacala Sutta (A 7.58 = SD 4.11).

The grand economic theories are not always right. When they are wrong, they can be seriously wrong, especially when they are based on greed, which is the case in our global systems. Yet we can still stay safe if we know how greed works and avoid it.

We will face a big financial crisis if you forget that money is only a means to ends. Money is only useful mostly for what it buys: it is of instrumental value.

Things like life and happiness are of intrinsic value. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to answer what is life really for, or what happiness is for. They are good in themselves.

If we lose money, we can always work hard again to rebuild our wealth. But to lose life or health, or true friends, or not knowing how to be happy, means we do not really know how to live life fully.

Money is a good servant, but a bad master. During hard times, there are more false gods, sick gurus and empty friends around. It is wise to avoid them if you can't awaken them.

Hard times such as the current global financial crisis are occasions to find out some real truths about life. Here are a few questions that reveal some vital facts of life:

“Who are those who have not let me down in such moments?” They are our true friends. “Who are those who have made life more difficult for me in such times?” Either we do not understand them better, or they do not really care for us.

“During such difficulties, have I learned what my true priorities in life are?” Finding a new job is only a temporary priority. What are our life-long priorities?

“What am I often unhappy about? Why do I feel upset about these things? What pattern (causes and effects) do I notice that lead to my unhappiness here?” If you think you know the answer, think again.

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“What are the good things about myself that I notice when I lost my job? Or, what positive things about myself do I notice when I lost a lot of money? Then ask *why* do I think that way?” When an answer comes to mind, ask *why* to that answer, until you feel some sense of peace.

Hard times mean that we need to plant new good karmic seeds because we have fully enjoyed our old ones.

Hard times make us see life in true light: we now see better than we used to. For, it is because of hard times that Buddhas arise in this world.

Remember how the Buddha sat all alone under the Bodhi tree, even after all the five monks have deserted him. In our more difficult moments and in our most crucial moments, we will need to help ourselves, and we can!

And if you know that neither you nor anyone else can benefit from such a situation, you should, ungrieving, bear it all: work on the Buddha’s advice: “How now, how shall I best apply my strength to what’s at hand?”

7.3 New Year Priorities

Happy New Year!

The new year is only moments away. The three highest priorities in my life right now are:

- (1) My work which is my true happiness.
- (2) My family who share in this happiness.
- (3) And you who can also benefit from this happiness.

This is my “triple happiness.”

Please spend some time in examining your priorities so that 2008 will be an even better year for you: examine the three highest priorities in your life.

Please ask yourself: are these priorities means or are they end? For example, money is an instrumental means but not very useful in itself, happiness is intrinsically useful: it is good in itself.)

Please join me in this reflection:

If we do not let go of the past, we are already dead.

If we do not let go of the future, we are not born yet.

If we do not let go of the present, we will never advance on the path of liberation.

Thank you for sharing moments of your life with me.

May you always find much more goodness than what you wished or prayed for.

7.4 Life's Three Highest Priorities

On this last day of the year, I want to reflect on my life's priorities. Fortunately, there is an instructive discourse, the Ādhipateyya Sutta (A 3.40)⁵, that helps me put my life in proper perspective.

The Ādhipateyya Sutta speaks of three things we should give the highest priority to. These three are:

- (1) The self;
- (2) Others (the world), and
- (3) True happiness (the Dharma).

You might like to join me in this reflection.

⁵ A 3.40 = SD 27.3.

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The self-priority

When I have desire or lust, it is almost always for an object outside of myself. What is it here that attracts me? Am I just attracted to a certain part of this person or object? Will I really be happy if I were to really get what I desire? What is it I really want in life?

When I am angry or hateful, what is it that I am really angry about? Or, is it just an excuse to show ill will towards something that I dislike in myself. How does my body feel when I am angry (raised blood pressure, faster heart-rate, negative thoughts): all these are not good for me. Anger is a harmful poison: let go of it, let go of it.

What is it that I fear? What am I confused about? Let me put it down into clear words, and examine it closely. Why am I fearful? What am I confused about? (Just ask, your mind will answer it.) Let me think of something happy.

If I value myself, let me be guided by the precepts:

- (1) Let me respect life, avoid violence; let me show lovingkindness to everyone around me.
- (2) Let me not take what is not mine; let me be generous whenever I can.
- (3) Let me respect those I like or love, and understand, even forgive them.
- (4) Let me speak the truth that is helpful and healing.
- (5) Let me keep my mind free from any kind of addictive behaviour.

All this I do because I am the most important person to me. Because I am the only person who can really change me for the better.

Other-priority

There are many people out there in the world. Many of them are wiser than I am: they will know if I were to commit any evil. They will censure and shun me. If not, the law will catch up with me.

There are those I think who behave stupidly or rudely. They are not doing those stupid or rude things just because of me. It is their nature and the conditions they live in. But they too can change.

Just as I know that others are doing wrong things, so others too will know if I am doing any evil. Let me not do anything that others will censure me.

Dharma-priority

I like the Buddhist way of life. As such, I will put every effort to be mindful in my daily life.

There are so many great and wonderful teachings I have yet to know. But I only need to know just a few useful teachings that will guide me and show me true happiness.

Let me not ask what Buddhism can do for me. For, I am Buddhism, in what I do, say and think. The Dharma is what I am, what I can be: awakened.

I will not live forever.

So let me live this life preciously.

Let me not ask for love,

but let me love so that I am loved.

Let me give and forgive

so that the hearts of others are warmed.

Let me hold back harsh words; they hurt both ways.

Let me sincerely and timely praise others,

for it empowers both sides.

Whenever I meet someone, let me say in my mind, “May you be well and happy!” He will see the radiance in my face.

Let me regularly set time aside for knowing the Dharma. It adds great value to what I rightly am and what I rightly have. Let me spend daily moments in stillness. This is the way to true happiness.

7 Spiritual happiness

A very Happy Double New Year!

The Ox reminds us that industry brings us success and happiness.

7.5 The Sunbird and Free Will

In early May 2009, an olive-backed sunbird (Singapore's most friendly bird) built a nest on a branch of a dried-up potted plant right in front of our house door. At first, the sunbird kept flying away and returning, each time bringing a piece of dry plant fibre, moss, spider's web and even colourful shiny strings.

After about two weeks the nest looked like an upside down pear with a long stalk, but soon looked straggly and messy on the outside, decorated with dead leaves, seed cases and strings. The lively bird laid two greenish-blue eggs with dark brown spots and lines, and sat incubating them, resting its tiny head on the small opening halfway on the nest. Often enough, it would not fly away even when we walked by within arm's reach.

At first, I watched with admiration at the bird's industry, bringing in only a tiny piece of building material each time; how the nest slowly took shape. And how brave, even audacious, it was, building its nest right before the door of our corner flat.

The more I looked, the more I saw that the bird had no choice but to make its nest this time of the year (April-August). It had no choice but to build that very same type of nest, and to lay two eggs, and to hatch them. And the hatchling had no choice but to grow into sunbirds, and to repeat the whole cycle all over again.

Humans, too, are caught up in bird-like cycles. We had no choice but to be born. As kids, we had no choice but to play kid's games. Often enough we go on playing these games all our lives, even as CEOs, prime ministers, presidents, dictators.

Greed, hate and delusion are the stuff of kids' games. Our greed limits our choices; our hate stunts our growth; our delusion makes us what we are not.

We have no choice but to follow the religion we have chosen; to follow the teacher we admire; to practise the teaching we practise; to join the group that we like. We have no choice but to live the life we have chosen.

We have become like rats in a maze: we just keep moving on and turning around corners. We have no choice but to keep on moving and turning around corners. Occasionally, we find a wheel, and we think it's fun running inside it. And then we are back in the maze, running, turning corners.

Can we ever get out of such cycles? Not if we are living in our past, ruled by our past. Even our future is shaped by our past. There is no present for us. When we lose touch with the present, we are swept away in the floods of the past and nose-dragged by the future.

The past is dead, leave it buried. I forgive myself for all the things I have done that I should not have done. I forgive myself for all the things I have not done that I should have done. I accept myself just as I am: I open the doors of my heart to me.

I forgive those who have caused me pain; for, the reality is that they are in greater pain than I am. I forgive those who are hurting me now; for, I have not yet seen my own happiness deep within myself.

I show all my lovingkindness to these pains. I accept them unconditionally. Having accepted them, I set them free; I let go of them all. These pains I feel are not really mine; I do not own them; I do not want them; I am letting them go.

For, they are telling me I can be a much better, happier and free person. Let me now happily live this moment.

7.6 Suttas, Pali and Chanting

An important part of Buddhist training is remembering what we have learned. Despite hearing some practical teachings, we tend to forget them in the busyness of our daily work and life. For this reason, we often find repetitive passages and teachings in the Suttas.

Another way to reinforce learning and gain wisdom is to chant them as the ancient monks and nuns did, and many of them still do today. Learning some Pali chants is both interesting and useful.

The sounds of Pali remind us of how the teachings sounded over the last 2500 years. Such sounds are soothing and helps calm the mind (especially before meditation). And when done with lovingkindness, such chanting helps to reduce stress, too. Here, our main purpose in chanting is to remember the teachings as we go about our daily lives.

Every Sutta Study and meditation session, in a sense, is like an unopened present from the Buddha. Such presents can only be opened in moments of inner silence and joy. Only then, we can see what these wonderful gifts truly are.

When we are able to see these Dharma blessings, we realize that *they actually have been there all the time* lying dormant in our hearts. We only need to wake them up, activate them.

Our compassion and wisdom are there lying dormant in our hearts. When the conditions are right, they awake and move into action, bringing true happiness into our lives and those we are linked with.

7.7 The Clear Light of Dharma

We often mistake Buddha Dharma for culture, race, politics, or even religion. The Dharma is a clear light that helps us see culture, race, politics and religion better, but it is not what it shines on. The light is not what it reveals: it is the clear sight of wisdom.

The light of Dharma makes us see that they are all means to an end. What is that end? True happiness.

If you place culture above Dharma, then you are a worldling. If you place race above Dharma, then you are a race-member or even a racist. If you place politics above Dharma, then you are a politician. If you place religion above Dharma, then you are a religion-follower.

These are parts of a bigger whole, that is, our life: to mistake a part for the whole is like getting upset over a word or sentence that someone has said (whatever the speaker may have meant it), without understanding the whole picture.

If we often tend to judge ourselves by a single event of what we see as “success” or “failure”, then we have failed to see the bigger picture called *life*. It's like when night comes, we never think of a new dawn only hours away. Why is this so painful and foolish: because we have judged ourselves by our past. Since we have failed in the past, we tend to live as if there is no present. Or worse, we lose ourselves thinking about a better tomorrow.

All we really have is the present.

The point is that we should continue giving ourselves every chance: we should be most generous to ourselves first, before we can really give to others, giving our full heart of lovingkindness, that is.

7.8 The True Relics: the Early Suttas

Not many people really listen to the Buddha today; maybe they do not know where to find the Buddha. Some even think dry bones and stones are Buddha relics, and that the Buddha is there.

But **the true relics are the early suttas**: they are all that we really have of what physically remains of the Buddha Dharma. If the Suttas are lost, it is a clear sign that the Dharma is disappearing. (Besides living teachers, the Suttas preserve valuable instructions on mindfulness leading to calm and insight.)

Some think the Buddha is found in a famous teacher,⁶ or in a large temple, or in a successful monastic (“the monk who sold his Ferrari?”), or in noisy rituals, or even in books! Some think a monastic or teacher is right because he approves of their ideas and actions. The error here is that we equate Dharma with worldly success (which makes us materialists), or with skin colour (which shows that we have an inferiority complex), or with past karma (which would make us fatalists.)

In fact, we can be very emotionally dependent on the approval of others. We feel delighted when people praise us, but dejected when they criticize us. In that case, our emotions are controlled by others!

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D 22, M 10)⁷, we are reminded that an important benefit of meditation is **emotional independence**: we are *happy not because* of anyone or anything, but we are simply happy deep inside. This is unconditional joy.

⁶ The Chinese rendition of “lama” as “Living Buddha” should never be used as it is a false view that encourages misunderstanding and exploitation.

⁷ See SD 13.2 & SD 13.3.

We do not do Buddhist work to seek approval from others, but simply because there is a profound joy inside us that we wish to share with others. We are like travellers on a lonely new planet. Once we discover a rich source of food, we alert and invite others to it, or we see a beautiful scenery or double rainbow or clear moonless starry night, we point it out to others, and we mutually rejoice. A great meditation is to recall how we, as happy children, would enjoy sharing our toys with others, and laugh together. Isn't it wonderful when people are joyful together? This is *mettā* (lovingkindness) and *muditā* (altruistic joy).

In fact, this is what always happens in the Minding Centre (TMC) during our Sutta Study (indeed, I must say at any Dharma-spirited Sutta Study).

The monk Puṇṇa,⁸ after his spiritual training, feels ready to go back to his home country and teach the Dharma. The Buddha questions him to see if he is really ready

As we study the Suttas, we are constantly being asked, like the Buddha asking Puṇṇa, when we are ready to teach the Dharma. We are ready when we realize that there is really nothing to lose when we do so.

8 SELF-AWAKENING IN THIS LIFE

8.1 Be a Dharma Heir!

The secret to awakening in the Buddha Dharma is through right listening. The word for a true disciple is *sāvaka* which means "listener."

⁸ Puṇṇ'ovāda Sutta (M 145 = SD 20.15).

8 Self-awakening in this life

When we first listen to the voice of the Dharma echoed by so many teachers, we seem to hear a different thing from each speaker: every teacher his teaching. The confusion is not in the teacher but in our shopping for teachers. Instead, we should listen for the healing patterns in the music of the Dharma. Listen to the Dharma, not the teacher.

When a famous foreign monastic or speaker comes to town, our ancient good karma draws us to listen to them. How many such speakers we have listened to, but are we any nearer to awakening? Many listen but do not hear.

The ancient monks have a way of listening to the Dharma: they do not merely look up in admiration at the Buddha's status and achievements, but with downcast eyes, they listen to his message with full mental focus. They listen and they hear.

The wisest saints of the Buddha's time, like Sāriputta and Citta the householder, declare that it is "not through faith" that they are awakened by the Buddha, but by their own wisdom in the Dharma, listening to the Buddha. With wise listening comes wise faith and wise seeing.

We spend hours reading Dharma books and looking at the Internet, and yet we are not fully awakened. We stop too long when we count the mile-stones of our journey, and worry about missing mile-stones and signposts. We should simply move on and not worry about what are missing in our lives.

This journey begins with closing our eyes and looking into the inner space of true awakening. And when we open our eyes again, we begin to see the treasures in our lives, they have been there all the time. Now we have the eyes to really see and enjoy them.

The maps for our journey are the ancient Suttas. Those who read the Suttas like newspapers and then cast them away like old news

will never find their way in life. Every Sutta has a line, or paragraph, or passage, that stands out above the rest, reaching deep into our hearts, turning it around in the right direction towards the city of nirvana.

The greater our defilements, the more boring we find the Suttas. These are those who are likely to write their own “suttas,” calling it the Buddha’s teaching. This is like a hasty traveller who looks at the forest and misses the path for the trees.

Such repetitive Sutta passages tire the eyes because the words often look the same. Only in carefully listening to them that our hearts brighten and light the path before us. As we advance on the Dharma path, the beautiful silence becomes ever clearer, and we are more sure of the way.

We still have the Sutta maps with us, giving clear instructions and inspiring stories on how to prepare for the journey, which direction to take, what to do when in difficulty, how to travel safely, and so on. Of course, if we have a guide, all these are expedited. The journey is surer, and we will be able to reach our destination more safely and quickly.

All we need to do is carefully listen to the guide as he explains the map, and to journey together. It is all right to be slow on this journey, so long as we do not stop too long.

Having gone slightly ahead of others, we can see behind us some of those who are uncertain of directions, or have lost their way. Out of compassion, we should show them the Sutta maps again and again, so that they are back on track. It is fun when we joyfully and safely travel together in the right direction.

Won’t you join me to listen to the Buddha’s voice in the Suttas, and show his Sutta maps to other travellers? Do not look at your lacks,

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then you will fail even before starting. We look for love and things in the world, but the true treasure lies within us, in the Dharma.

Listen to your inner goodness and the blessings that you have which many others do not. There are so many others who are suffering more than ourselves. Seeing the pains of others, we realize ours are much less, and lessening. We only need to stretch a joyful guiding hand.

Join me in this journey and learn to read the maps rightly. Let us be guides unto others; help me teach others to read the Sutta maps so that they, too, can make their own journey. Join me in this wonderful inward journey.

Let us together be Dharma heirs.

8.2 Getting the Best from Your Mind

The only source for our true happiness is our calm and clear mind. It is also the best source of creative ideas and guidance in life.

Some of my best inspirations very often come to me as soon as I wake up in the stillness of dawn. As my mind awakens while the rest of my body is still not fully operative, some wonderful ideas fill my mind. I will often record them in the Sutta translation notes or use them for my weekly inspirational Dharma messages.

Reflecting on such beautiful thoughts energizes my mind, and at once I want to get up, and note down my ideas. It is vital that such wonderful ideas be recorded at once.

I notice that if I do not note down such subtle ideas immediately, they would usually be lost in no time, as soon as the day's routine and business build up. The negative attitudes of others, too, can hide these wonderful moments so that we forget them.

I am also inspired with wonderful ideas when I listen to people, especially when they speak wisely and compassionately on the Dharma. The more the speaker is inspired by the Dharma, the more they have tasted the Dharma, the more I am moved to work harder at the Sutta translation. Such wonderful happiness also enriches my studies and talks inspiring the audience.

Very often, the ideas that arise are totally new. One of the happiest moments in my Dharma life is when various strands of the Dharma begin to fit together and form a beautiful whole picture, making me better understand some difficult or subtle point of the Dharma.

This is how I discovered the Buddha's guarantee that proper reflection on impermanence will bring us streamwinning in this life itself (Samyutta ch 25)⁹. Later, I discovered that a few other practising monks have also been emphasizing the same idea, which gives me greater confidence to promote this wonderful good news.

The idea is to spend some quiet time with yourself, especially if your work or daily life involves meeting a lot of people, which means you may encounter a lot of negative ideas, many of which will unconsciously affect or influence your life.

Some would suggest that we read the lives of successful people. Somehow I cannot help feeling if we do that we cannot really be happier than their authors, no matter how many of them we read. My vision is simple: if you are an artist or musician, would you learn more from watching living artists and musicians, or from a living master himself? I leave the answer to you.

For me, that living master is the Buddha. The Buddha still lives as the Dharma. Each time I read a passage from the Suttas or hear the Dharma, it helps me know myself better, it motivates me to

⁹ For details, see S 25.1 = SD 16.7; S 25.5 see SD 17.3 (4.5.1); S 25.6 see SD 17.4 (10).

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investigate my mind further, and it inspires me to communicate someone like you with this good news.

Often I feel like a child who likes to share, even gives away, his toys, especially as I get better ones. See how a happy child forgives and forgets things: he just moves on, always looking forward to a new day.

When we understand the child in us, we become better adults. Forgiving others, letting go of a painful past, and looking forward each day anew. This is how practising monks and nuns live: that is why they are happy.

We can be happy just like them, often even more so. As the Buddha says in Dhammapada 142, even if a person is well dressed (in layman clothing) but his mind is at peace, he is truly a monk.

8.3 Bus-ride to Nirvana

My emergency counselling session was just over at the TMC near midnight, and I just managed to catch the last bus no 187 home. It is not crowded and comfortably peopled. There is a certain calm air pervading the bus, and people speak in soft tones. A few are resting with eyes closed, others are sitting quietly relaxed as the bus smoothly sail through the almost deserted well-lit streets of Jurong East.

It is a good feeling, knowing I'm going home, confident that the bus will reach my destination. It's like practising the Buddha Word and feeling inner stillness as I move through life. I know this stillness will always be with me and guide me rightly.

Imagine how lonely and lost some people would feel when they miss the last bus. They might even feel a sense of unease or fear all alone in the blanket of surrounding darkness and strangers. Their

first thought surely is how to get home, have a wash and a good rest.

It's good just to be home and be yourself.

It's sad that some people do not know which bus to take, or worse, how to get to their destination, that is, if they have one.

I read somewhere that there are those who enjoy taking pictures of buses and talking mostly about buses. I suppose we could make some friends that way. But I still prefer riding buses when I need to, rather than photoing them or collecting their number plates, and telling my friends how many buses I've seen. Knowledge collects; wisdom lets go.

Buddhism is like a network of buses that takes us home. But we must go to the right bus-stop and stop the right bus, board it, pay the fare, and then simply sit back and enjoy the journey. We never quarrel with the driver, nor chat too much with him. We can enjoy the journey, or maybe read a good book, or just lie back at peace with ourselves.

When we open our eyes, we are already home. My purpose of life is to go home; it's always fun to go home after giving an enjoyable Sutta class, or after a meditation course, or a counselling session, or a trip to the Botanic Gardens or Labrador Park or Butik Batok Nature Reserve.

The purpose of Buddhism is to bring us home, where we really belong. Our true home is our inner joyful stillness. As our heart becomes more still, we begin to feel more confident that we are approaching this most beautiful city in the cosmos: nirvana.

8.4 Making Sense of Things

What is *experience*? Let us examine this in a practical way. First of all, we can only experience things *by way of* our six senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. *What* we can experience are only their respective sense-objects: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and thoughts.

According to Buddhist psychology, there are various stages in our experience: we sense, perceive, conceive things, and then deliberate on them, more or less in that sequence. “Sense” here refers to an external object that stimulates a sense. When this happens, we at once try to make sense of it. We give it meaning, by naming it: green, or music, or fragrant smell, or warm touch, or an idea.

Most of us have no control over how we experience things: they are reflex actions. Once we give meaning to our experience, we react to them. A slimy green toad: I don’t like toads. Ah, that music brings back a sweet memory of an enchanted evening. Oh, that fragrance, it makes me sad, as it reminds me of someone I lost. How warm the cat’s fur feels. Hmm, I’m jealous, how I hate this idea. And so on.

How we present ourselves publicly is another matter. We rarely act as we “feel.” We wear mask for the occasion. For most, life is a stage of masked performances.

How we feel is how we like, dislike, or don’t care about an experience. As mentioned, for most people, this is a reflex action. We tend to act, or rather react, autopiloted by our past experiences.

The meanings we attribute to things are almost always based on past experiences and memories. We almost never look at a thing as it is in the present moment. When we like something, it proliferates itself into desire or lust (we want more of it). When we dislike something, it proliferates itself into hate (we push it away). When

we ignore something, it proliferates itself as ignorance and fear. Hence, our biases of greed, hate, delusion and fear.

So, we first perceive a form or shape, and we name it—blue, green, dog, man, and so on. Then we immediately refer it to the mind which adds its own meanings. So there is a further complication (*papañca*). The mind, too, is a sense-organ and generates similar meanings, and these are called concepts, such as I, you, mine, beautiful, ugly, happy and so on. All such truths are of course relative.

In fact, all truths are relative.

There is the truth that is suffering,
countering the truth of non-suffering.
There is the truth that is the arising of suffering,
countering the truth of letting go.
There is the truth that is ending of suffering,
countering the truth of samsara; and
There is the truth that is the way,
countering what leads us back into suffering.

Discovering the “truth” or the “ultimate truth” is only the beginning of our spiritual liberation. The final goal of liberation is when we are truly at peace, beyond conceptions of truth and untruth.

This freedom from suffering arises when we begin to see directly into the true nature of impermanence. This understanding slows down, even stops, our reflex feelings, our autopilot mind. We see things in a broader perspective. We begin to truly see the “I” for what it really is—I am not the only one suffering; others are suffering, too. This terrible thought that has arisen, I do not have to own it: I can let it go.

The “I” widens into “we,” embracing more situations and beings unconditionally. The true practising monastics, for example, no more

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restrict themselves to their biological family, but embrace all beings as their universal family. All beings are one family.

This is the beginning of ethics, of moral virtue. It is the beginning of compassion, that is, kindness to others even when they do not deserve it. This is spiritual liberation.

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For a similar but more detailed reflection, see Ajahn Sucitto's article on "Working on Perception": <http://dharma.org/bcbs/Pages/documents/-WorkingwithPerceptionbyAjahnSucitto.pdf>

8.5 We Can Still Meet the Buddha

The Suttas often tell us how a person meets the Buddha and his whole life is changed. A serial killer (Aṅgulimāla) becomes a monk and arhat. A high-class prostitute (Ambapālī) gives up her lucrative life and becomes a nun and an arhat. Countless people just like you and I meet the Buddha and join the stream to nirvana.

Ever since then, countless millions of lives continue to be changed into great happiness. You don't read about such people in the newspapers or glossy magazines, but they are more real and happier. If you chance to get lost in the villages of rural Thailand, Myanmar, or Yunnan, or Sri Lanka, or Tibet, Zanskar, or Bhutan, you might meet these happy, friendly and generous people.

In fact, we need not go very far to meet simple happy Buddhists. I once met a young man on busy Orchard Road in Singapore. He had drawn a large circle around himself and sat meditating inside it, and on the pavement he had written a short message inviting you to join him. It's a great way to advertise the Buddha's Teaching!

I started off by saying how meeting the Buddha can change your life. If we cannot meet the Buddha, you could meet one of his disciples, that is, a very peaceful monk or nun with his almsbowl without a dollar or cent to his/her name, but is a radiant and wise person, whose sight or very tone of voice is enough to bring you peaceful joy.

When I was a young monk in Wat Sraket, Bangkok, some quarter-century back, I once sat sidewise Thai-style all alone blissfully listening to Ajahn Sumedho in Section 5 (the abbot's quarters) as he spoke to me for a straight 2 hours just on the Vinaya. I do not remember the words but all that time spent with him I don't remember moving a muscle either. It is as if he knew I was going to do Buddhist work for a long time to come.

So if we cannot meet the Buddha, meet one of his true disciples. Even if that is difficult, says the Phagguna Sutta (A 3.56), we can meet the Buddha by listening to the Buddha's Teaching.

Or, by investigating the Dharma. This simply means constantly reflecting how impermanent everything is inside us and all around us. (I had this terribly painful lumbar sprain last week (again!), but it is now gone. Ratna fell running after a bus the following week, and she sat on the pavement until I arrived to help her up! She too is healing fast. Two aging folks working together, I thought, and smile at us.)

Pain arises when you grasp at *things* and fail to accept *change*. In other words, suffering is optional.

Notice how the boring things tend to repeat themselves. Notice how the good and happy things pass away quickly. Notice how quickly our mind changes.

When we accept change, we are at peace with pain. Suffering is optional.

8.6 Not by Works Alone

After years of living in Singapore, leading a semi-reclusive life of translating and teaching the early Buddhist suttas, and supporting my family as a lay Dharma teacher and meditation therapist, we (my wife, two young sons and myself) joined a full day trip to Johor (the Malaysian state just north of Singapore).

This trip was a very successful one because everything turned out just right. It was a week-end, and I had no teaching, counseling, family or urgent task. But the main reason I accepted the invitation was that it was from a remarkable Dharma-inspired practising Buddhist.

I will call him Sudhana for reasons you will discover if you read between the lines of this reflection. He is one of the mature adults who have been attending my Dharma courses and Sutta classes, and truly benefitted from them. Let me say that his whole life is changed by the Dharma he tasted.

He is a better husband, a better father, a better family man, a better worker, a better friend, and of course a better person. Yes, the thought of becoming a monk does arise in Sudhana's mind, but he well knows that walking the humble path of streamwinning puts him well ahead of the many yellow-necks¹⁰ who haunt us today.

How do you know the Dharma has changed a person's life? He will consistently tell you he is happy. He lost a bundle in the recent global financial collapse. But unlike others who put \$100 into the donation box to con "the Buddha" into giving him a million in return, Sudhana says that his loss is his *dāna* (gift) to the economy!

¹⁰ See Dakkhina Vibhanga Sutta (M 142.8/3:256 = SD 1.9); Jivika Sutta (It 3.5.2/89 f) = SD 28.9b.

How do you know the Dharma has changed a person's life? You are happy when you meet him, or even think of him. No, I am not talking about how we feel towards a famous religious master, or our favourite pop star, or a VIP politician who just shook our hand. That is admiration and self-satisfaction.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with just that. But I'm talking about a sense of deep happiness that makes us so fulfilled with a calm joy that we feel do not need anything else in the world.

We often enjoy being before a crowd, being the centre of attention; we enjoy being a noble tasking at trying change people's lives; we enjoy the power of teachings we do not understand; we are thrilled at the presence of those we canonize as arhats and living masters. The point is we should see a Dharma-moved change in our lives. If we lack emotional independence, we will always be dependent on an external power figure.

Let me come back to Sudhana. He is an assertively compassionate person who would gently and patiently talk Dharma to his work colleagues and to anyone who cares to ask, and yet does not dominate any conversation.

Oh, yes he is a consistent meditator, that is, he sits in mindfulness whenever there is an opportunity. This is the real source of his miraculous change and spiritual strength. Although he is not as intellectually prone as I am to be, our mutual Dharma interest melds our minds together in a Sutta study. His attention span is remarkable, which is helped by the fact that he always ensures his handphone is switched off for better reception of the Dharma,

Sudhana is not a social worker or a fund-attracting CEO, who would break any precept to help others. On the contrary, he is an amazing simple, calm yet firm person who is inspired not to break any of the precepts, even when helping others, and who uses the eight precepts to lost weight, bodily and mentally.

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Sudhana may not remember the exact title or reference of the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇi Sutta (A 10.177),¹¹ but he certainly knows that if we do only good works, no matter how good, but do not keep to the precepts, we will be reborn with just rewards: we will be well loved, well cared for, well provided for—as a loving pet (an elephant, horse, cow, dog, cat etc)!

Which reminds me: please treat your pet well, because it is likely to have been such a person in its past life. Elsewhere I have written about how our pets can go to heaven.¹²

So what is the vital difference between good works and moral virtue? Good works is mainly our benefitting from the misfortune and badness of others, while our moral virtue is self-respect and other-respect that bring us untold spiritual happiness. No matter how “good” a worker we may be, without moral virtue, we but look good in the bad of others. We are “good” because of the bad of others! We have nothing to give really. People may think we are “good,” but even we do not even know who we really are.

Maybe that is why we do good works famously. But when we are morally virtuous, our actions are more easily guided by the clear calm of the Dharma: it gives meaning and truth to good works. For, we are showing others their own goodness. We are like two clear mirrors facing each other.

By the way, you may try, out of evolutionary curiosity or lack of free will, to find out who Sudhana really is. This does not matter; anyway; for, my point is that Sudhana is a true seeker, which you yourself are, or can be. I’m not talking about a person, but a type of individual.

¹¹ SD 2.6a.

¹² “Animals go to heaven,” see 16.1 (page 178).

8.7 Belief and Knowledge in Religion

Almost all religions today are based on **belief**, that is personal or official opinions, nothing based on personal experience: for example, no one has really met God, so naturally a lot of faith is needed. This problem is an ancient one, but apparently the Buddha is one of the first to solve this tricky problem by clearly differentiating between “belief” and “knowledge.”

In short, we can say that we do not really have knowledge of true reality until we are awakened (like the Buddha). So even we as Buddhists now, all we have at the moment is mostly “belief.” But how is a Buddhist belief different from, say, God-centred belief?

Indeed thinking scientists know that “both religion and science are founded on faith,” for example, the existence of something beyond our universe (like parallel universes)¹³.

“For that reason, both monotheistic religion and orthodox science fail to provide a complete account of physical existence.”¹⁴ Long before modern science, modern philosophy, modern evangelism and modern self-centredness, the Buddha has given a clear explanation between belief and knowledge, and how this understanding is vital in our efforts towards awakening.

The evangelists are *trying* to destroy Buddhism from outside. The “modern” monks are destroying Buddhism from within. The best defence we have is keep the Dharma within ourselves where no one can touch it, but we can joyfully touch others lives.

¹³ See Paul Davies, “taking science on faith,” Straits Times, 27 Nov 2007, for those who takes ST as more authoritative than the Tipitaka.

¹⁴ Paul Davies, author of “Cosmic Jackpot: Why our universe is just right for life.” 2007.

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By the way: you can awaken to the path to Nirvana in this life itself: the main hindrance to awakening is the decision not to! (I'm not talking about any ceremony, vow or religion, but something the Buddha himself has guaranteed: see Saṃyutta ch 25.)¹⁵

9 LEARNING FROM THE SUTTAS

9.1 Effective Listening

One of my most rewarding feelings is to see the peaceful joy on the faces of my audience when we study the Suttas. It is unmistakable in many of them: it reflects a deeper peace within, and often they would share this with others. Many lives are changed for the better by hearing the Dharma. And the crowd is growing, too.

But we must not forget those who still say things like “The Suttas are *cheem* (local Fujianese, “very deep”),” or “The Suttas are very serious,” and so on. This is often said after only one sitting. This may well be true because, perhaps because of the person's *past* karma, or the day's Sutta *is* a difficult one, or it happens that the person finds it difficult since it is his *first* time.

Perhaps, he has a short attention span, or cannot relate to any talk that has no joke, that is, without comic relief; or they have their handphones are more important than the Dharma. Often the regulars at our Sutta classes enthusiastically encourage such newcomers by telling that not to give up at the first blush.

But why is it that some people enjoy Sutta classes, and some do not seem to. One good reason is that they are not aware of the steps of

¹⁵ For details, see S 25.1 = SD 16.7; S 25.5 see SD 17.3 (4.5.1); S 25.6 see SD 17.4 (10).

learning that underlie Buddhist training. So it is good to know something about this.

The three levels of Buddhist learning are: the word level, the thought level, and the feeling level.

The word level is simply that of *listening* to the Sutta study, allowing as many words to sink in as possible. Study notes are always provided, so we can make notes or read the texts again in our free time. Don't worry about what you do not understand. The little pieces that you understand will somehow piece together in time, and form clearer and connected pictures.

The thought level is when you *reflect* on what you have heard or learned, relating it to your personal experiences and to what you already know. When you look into the mirror of the Suttas you see yourself.

Just let what you have learned float around your mind, and somehow they will connect like stellar particles to form bright nebulas, and you begin to see other aspects of the teachings, and begin to understand yourself better. A new world opens to you.

The feeling level is the most important level: it is listening *without* words. Examine what you have learned in the stillness of your mind. What is the teaching pointing to? What are the Suttas trying to say about you? Sometimes we only listen to the words, without hearing the silence behind them. Remember when you *feel* happy: there are no words for it.

Dharma is like listening to beautiful music. You cannot enjoy it if you keep talking at it, or comparing this teacher's sounds with that teacher's sounds. You may like a teacher because *you* think that *he* thinks like *you*. Don't just listen to the teacher, hear the Dharma; then all teachers would sound like *virtuosi playing the same beautiful music in different ways.*

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To benefit most from Sutta study, you are advised to:

- (1) Calm the body: dress simple and comfortably, sit still, relax. Turn off the phones.
- (2) Calm your speech: in the Dharma hall, speak happily or remain quiet in a friendly way.
- (3) Calm your mind: let go of the past, let go of the future; be present in the Sutta study.

If you are silent enough, you will hear the Dharma.

9.2 Opening Our Eyes to the Dharma

There are many well-organized Buddhism classes (English and Chinese) we can join today in Singapore. The common feedback I receive however is that the drop-out rate is very high. The class may start with a hundred, and then drop to 10, within a few weeks. Sometimes only one student loyally remains and completes the course.

Here are some of the feedbacks I get from various students:

- (1) Students find the lessons boring after a few lessons.
- (2) Other commitments prevent them from completing the course.
- (3) Teachers know a lot but do not seem to be Dharma-inspired.
- (4) Teachers are not able to answer certain troubling questions or just palm them off.
- (5) Students have difficulty with Pali language.
- (6) Students say they are learning nothing (irrelevance), so they give up.

And so on.

The good thing is that so far no students have asked for any refund, even when some of these courses may cost hundreds of dollars. Apparently, the organizers generally are not totally disappointed

since the money goes to paying the teachers and benefits the temple or centre.

Another point I would like to add is that we are not sure what happens to those who do graduate. Do they continue to teach and to do so effectively? Have their lives changed spiritually, or is it just another academic qualification? Is there any fellowship amongst these graduates, or are they generally aloof?

Buddhist education in Singapore currently appears to be very private enterprises by isolated groups. There is no concerted effort, not to say any common syllabus, nor any follow-up plans. Although some centres raise substantial funds and useful new members this way, others have to pay expensive licence fees for their accreditation (say from a Sri Lanka university). In other words, a lot remains to be desired in Buddhist education here.

Somehow I have a gut feeling that many, if not most, people who sign up for such courses, are not interested in a certificate, diploma or even degree. They want a systematic and effective study of the Suttas, teachings, meditation, that is, some aspects of Buddhism that would spiritually enrich their lives in a significant way.

Maybe it is for this reason that I often have a full week of Sutta and meditation classes. This is especially inspiring because I have tried my best to present the Suttas as they are, without making any special effort to “entertain” the class. It is encouraging to know that there are many who have a great desire for the Buddha Dharma through the primary materials, the Suttas.

My point is we should not be discouraged when we find little or no worldly fun in a class. We join a Buddhist class not to be entertained but to be enlightened. As our wisdom grows, we will discover a growing bliss in our own inner clarity.

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I like to imagine when teaching the Suttas, I am in the living presence of the Buddha himself. No, I do not see him as an eternal figure, but I take it as a Buddha-recollection that we are very fortunate to have ancient teachings that are very close to what he has himself taught.

What if the class is boring because it is not Dharma-spirited. Then it is time to move on. The longer we are stuck in such an unhappy situation, the more we will blame Buddhism, instead of looking deeper into our minds. The point is that Buddhism is how we live, speak and think.

We should also be wary of teachers who are false (ignorant or lacking mindfulness), or weak (not keeping to the precepts), or uninspired (takes the Dharma merely as a classroom subject). Those who blindly follow others, no matter what their religion, are only preparing themselves for impending failure, sadness and suffering. Please reflect on this humorous story circulating the Internet, which I find (wittingly or unwittingly) point to some deep eye-opening wisdom.

Two blind pilots wearing dark glasses enter the plane, one with a guide-dog and another with a cane. Nervous laughter spreads through the cabin. The men enter the cockpit, the door closes and the engines start up. The passengers begin glancing nervously around, searching for some sign that this is just a little practical joke. None is forthcoming.

The plane gathers speed down the runway and those at the window seats realize they're headed straight for the water's edge. As it begins to look as though the plane will plough into the water, panicked screams fill the cabin. Then, the plane lifts smoothly into the air.

The passengers relax and laugh sheepishly and soon all retreat into their magazines and small chat, secure in the understanding that

the plane is in good hands. In the cockpit, one of the blind pilots then says to the other, “You know, Bob, one of these days, they’re gonna scream too late and we’re all gonna die.”

There are many Buddhisms today: what we need is the Dharma that opens our eyes and liberates us from ignorance and suffering.

9.3 Self-discovery through Sutta Study

Sutta study, especially Dharma-inspired sutta study, is about self-discovery. Many of us are attracted to the physical aspects of Buddhism:

the large impressive temples: the people there must have very good karma; Buddha relics and holy images: they must have great power; anyone in their monastic robes: they must be holy.

So we try to connect to them, attracted to them, consciously or unconsciously, hoping that we too would have a share of such “blessings.”

Let us reflect on the words of the arhat, Lakunṭaka Bhaddiya, a dwarf with a golden voice:

Those people who have judged [measured] me by appearance
and who follow me by voice,
Overcome by desire and passion, they know me not.
The foolish one, surrounded by mental hindrances,
neither knows the inside
Nor sees the outside—he is indeed misled by voice.
Who knows not the inside, but sees the outside:
Seeing only external fruits, he, too, is misled by voice.
Who knows the inside, and sees the outside:

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Seeing without obstructions, he is not misled by voice.

(Tha 469-472 ≠ A 2:71)¹⁶

But we are only looking at external features, at the wrappings, without examining what is inside. “Inside” here meaning inside ourselves: why are we attracted to these external features? Asking such questions again and again, you will be surprised what you discover about yourself there.

In Dharma-guided Sutta Study, you are constantly challenged to ask yourself “why” you like or dislike something, what things happen. You are challenged to see causes and effects in your life, the rise and fall of events, of impermanence everywhere in your life.

Sutta study, especially Dharma-inspired sutta study, is about self-discovery: it is the discovery that there is no self, that suffering, its arising, its ending, and its path are all within ourselves.

The Minding Centre is about self-discovery through Suttas and mindfulness practice. The minding centre is everywhere, but if we gather together more often and more regularly in the right spirit, the still centre becomes stronger and clearer wherever you are. It promises liberation (stream-winning) here and now.

If you examine why you are thinking what you are thinking right now, it is the beginning of self-discovery: you are minding your centre.

¹⁶ See SD 3.14(6).

10 BUDDHISM AND RELIGION

10.1 Is Buddhism a Religion, a Philosophy, or What?

There was a time over a generation ago when scholars generally defined “religion” as some kind of system or teaching that “believes in God or godliness.” But Buddhism does not emphasize this aspect even though Buddhism, like Brahmanism and Hinduism, does have stories about Brahma (God) and the gods.

Buddhism teaches that we can and must make our own effort in spiritual liberation. Indeed, who else can help us if we do not help ourselves?

So is Buddhism a religion? If we define religion as dependence on some *external* source of liberation, Buddhism is a religion for those who have faith that the Buddha can liberate them by, say, being re-born in Pure Land.

But those who follow the early teachings of Buddhism generally regard mind-training, especially through meditation, as the “direct way” to personal liberation. We could say that they regard Buddhism as a “spiritual system.”

Some such people who are very committed to Buddhist practice, for example, they meditate everyday, keep to a diet that does not harm living beings, support themselves with right livelihood, and take pains to keep to the five precepts, Buddhism is definitely a “way of life.”

Then there are scholars who mostly study Buddhism according to their special field of expertise. It is a bit more complicated here. The anthropologists, for example, might regard Buddhism as some kind of “belief-system.” The sociologists are more interested in Buddhism as a “social system,” how it functions in society, more than anything

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else. Then there are the Buddhologists, who mostly examine the Buddhist texts, and try to reconstruct some sort of “historical Buddhism,” or at least, a “textual Buddhism.”

There are again specialists and enthusiasts who are interested mainly in Buddhist architecture, Buddhist music, Buddhist magic, Buddhist literature, Buddhist economics, Buddhist politics, or Buddhist psychology. As such, Buddhism can be all things to all men.

For the growing number of non-Buddhists who meditate or are attracted to Buddhist teachings, they know it as inner stillness.

The most convenient way of looking at Buddhism, as in the case of other world religions, with so many facets, perspectives and realities, is to take it as a “civilization,” or even more broadly, a “system.”

On a practical level, Buddhism is about being truly happy, that is, keeping our bodies healthy and useful by way of the five precepts, and to be truly mentally happy through a calm, clear and ready mind, and to really enjoy the company of others, getting to really know them and to bring them lasting happiness and true wisdom.

It's useful also to know what Buddhism is *not*.

Buddhism is not about chanting so many hundreds, thousands or millions of this or that chant, or performing some powerful ritual. This is likely to increase a false self-confidence, or even conceit, that I have done “more” than others. It is about learning to keep the mind calm and clear so that we understand its true nature.

Buddhism is not found in large colourful buildings with walls hiding TV, expensive electronics, hotel comfort, money, and charisma. It is about how we reach out to others with lovingkindness through our actions, speech and minds.

Buddhism is not about speaking in riddles, punctuated by grunts and shouts, nor about whether a dog has Buddha-nature or not. It is

to directly look into ourselves, our minds, seeing the problem, its roots, and dealing with them directly.

Buddhism is not about relics (are they real in the first place?). The true relics are the Buddhist suttas and teachings that bring us true joy and inner stillness. Buddhism is like good seeds that we plant and grow as healthy food that nourishes us so that we can turn to our real tasks of life.

Buddhism is not about monastics who do not keep to their vows or who lead false lives. We should never contribute to their failure to keep to the monastic rules. As lay Buddhists, we must constantly remind them to keep the precepts, study, practise and realize the Dharma. For, we get the kind of Buddhism we deserve.

Buddhism is a readiness to help others wisely and effectively when the occasion arises. When we are unable to do so, we should examine deep inside why: is it selfishness, fear, hate, ignorance? Then, we try again and again until we know we have rid of that negative quality.

Buddhism is about self-knowledge. It is like when we were children with fear of the dark and loneliness, clinging to a parental figure. As we finish schooling, we become emotionally stronger with knowing. True education is about emotional independence: our happiness is not dependent on things on earth or in heaven, or anywhere else. The truth is in here, not out there.

Buddhism is definitely not tricking people into signing a policy, after which they are trapped by the fine print of dogma.

Buddhism is about questioning ourselves: how do I *feel* when reading this? *Why* do I feel like this? Go on asking, and you will in due course discover that you are your best teacher.

When you stop thinking and questioning, others will think for you! For the true practitioner, Buddhism is "emptiness." For the Buddhist

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saint, it is true liberation. For the Buddha, perhaps he would say, “What Buddhism? Never heard of it!”

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See “Imagine the Past 2000 Years Without Religion”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VyA6HSA4ZM&feature=related>

10.2 Buddha Dharma is For All Religions

The historical Buddha teaches to everyone: to kings, nobles, brahmins, merchants, bankers, wanderers, courtesans, road-sweepers, outcastes, and of course the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. There is no designation “Buddhist” in the Buddha’s time and for centuries after that.

In fact, the earliest Buddhists are the arhats, and those who have become streamwinners, that is, those who have realized that there is nothing permanent in this body, are not superstitious (not attached to vows and rituals), and have no doubts about themselves or the Three Jewels in self-awakening.

Today, we tend to take the term “Buddhist” as a “name” (or nominally), but not always in practice. So it is a statistical term, a number. So, perhaps more than 45% of Singaporeans are Buddhists. But does this mean one out of every two people we meet are likely to be kind and compassionate? This remains to be seen.

Sometimes I wonder if people who are good and kind tend to turn to religion, or that religion makes them good and kind. We see little evidence of the latter: there is so much violence and materialism in religion in the world today.

But I know that Buddha Dharma, that is, the early teachings of the Buddha, has the power to make us good and compassionate. In fact, very often, I use the mind-healing and heart-warming self-help teachings of the Buddha changing people's lives or at least helping them rise above their sufferings.

I find that teaching Buddha Dharma and its practices as a “non-religious” self-help method so rewarding. People from practically all the major religions join the TMC meditation courses, therapy sessions, counseling sessions and other courses.

Many in due course become Buddhists, but many, too, keep the Buddha Dharma as a living part of their lives so that they find practising their old faiths more enriching and meaningful because they have seen beyond religious labels.

Even the professionals (doctors, care-givers, entrepreneurs, etc) are finding that the Buddha's meditation methods healing and fulfilling, making their worldly success more real and meaningful.

Buddha Dharma has become for many, the lifeblood for the dry bones of their shaky religious beliefs and routine secular lifestyles. It is such a fulfilling experience to see people at peace with themselves.

There are still many people out there who are unhappy, hurt or confused. Please reach out to them with your Dharma-moved happiness and self-healing, by for example simply telling them that they can practise the Buddha's meditation and mind-healing no matter what religion they are, without having to “convert.”

Buddha Dharma makes us rise above religion to the true peace within. It is the still centre is life's storm.

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Aside:

For those wondering about the current “religious” violence in Tibet, it is helpful to read: “Why are Nuns and Monks in the Streets?”(Parts I & II) by Jose Cabezon¹⁷.

10.3 Buddhism Goes Beyond God and Religion

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus (341-270 BCE), solved the riddle of the God-idea long ago. Even if these words were only attributed to him, the logic and reasoning are very clear:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God? (Epicurus, attributed)

The British philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), puts it in the form of a dilemma:

If the evil in the world is from the intention of the Deity, then he is not benevolent. If the evil in the world is contrary to his intention, then he is not omnipotent. But it is either in accordance with his intention or contrary to it. Therefore, either the Deity is not benevolent or he is not omnipotent.

(Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779: parts 10-11)

¹⁷ http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/international/145/why_are_nuns_and_monks_in_the_streets_%28parts_i_%26_ii%29?page=3

We can see that religious ideas, whether they are about God, or the soul, or any theological issue, can be very problematic. For this reason, God-believers need to say: “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but *believe that you may understand*,” which is essentially the same as saying: “Don’t think about it, just follow!”

However, on a more positive note, a Buddhist would interpret this statement as meaning, “I believe, so that I will understand.” That is, I have faith so that I will be wise in due course to understand how the mind creates God and religion, good and evil, suffering and liberation. Doesn’t this sound more true, sensible and spiritual, that is, to simply to say: “Seek to understand that you may believe—and be free.”

No matter how clear a religious statement may be, it is not knowledge. It tells us nothing about ourselves or the world. Examine such statements: “God created the world,” “God is love,” “Our lord died for you,” and so on. Now compare these statements: “Time created the world,” “Love is good,” “The soldier died for his country.” Clearly, these latter statements make more sense, because they talk about things that actually happened, and not cheat us into believing notions that are not only non-existent but harmful to life, happiness and progress.

Religious statements are not knowledge; they tell us nothing except what the speaker wants us to believe, and which probably the speaker himself knows nothing about. In other words, a religious statement always has an agenda: “Give up your way of thinking and listen to me. Do as I say.”

Religious statements belong to the same category as stories and symbols. We love fables, fairy tales and Star Wars, but we never take them to be real and true. They are entertaining, yet informative, that is, in-formative. They form ideas *IN* our heads.

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Fairy tales and fables often have a moral: the good may suffer at the beginning but they will prosper in the end; be kind to others, and you will be richly rewarded; good will ultimately triumph; and so on. In other words, we must remember the spirit of the letter; the truth behind the words; where the sign is pointing to.

Buddhism is at its unparalleled best when it goes beyond religious language. Some well known Buddhist statements are: "Every thing is impermanent; every thing is unsatisfactory; everything has no abiding essence." By "thing" here is meant a material thing or mental state. Whether something is material or mental, a thing or an idea, it is impermanent and as such is never truly satisfying.

"Everything" means all things in this world and the principles (or "nature") governing them. They have no abiding entity. In other words, there is no abiding entity, anything permanent, behind or underlying what we experience as physical or as mental.

Religion is often nothing but words, words, words, or a holy book. Where do the words come from; who made the book holy? Before there were words or books, were there religions as we know them today? However, even without words and books, Buddhism will still be true because it is the knowledge and vision of the world as it really is.

This is the way things are. No one invented or created it. But the Buddha discovers it and teaches it to us in a compassionate, systematic and effective way. If we allow ourselves to see this, we will understand it, and then we will believe it, so that we are free from suffering.

These wisdom and faith bring us great inner stillness. In our clarity of mind and openness of heart, we are able to see that there is no *us* believers versus *them* sinners. There is just ignorance that needs to be removed.

10.4 Buddhism is as easy as Walking (a parable)

Buddhism as taught by the Buddha is as easy as walking. Watch how an infant learns to walk: he (or she) never gives up. It is in his (or her) nature to walk. He begins by crawling, then sitting up, then holding on some support, then wobbling on his strengthening legs, and finally he runs and jumps. It's always a joy to see such a natural development.

In Dharma terms, we are mostly still infants. Deep inside we have that wonderful innocence and a great drive to learn. Given a conducive environment, we would make those baby-like effort to crawl with the Dharma, to walk with it, and then to run with it. Above all, we learn that it is best to sit still with the Dharma.

Often, as it were, we get a person not familiar with baby-raising, who comes along and pushes a walking-stick to the baby. "Come on, use this stick, you can walk faster and farther with it!"

The baby is of course fascinated with the walking-stick; for, it has never seen one before. But the best it could do is to bite and taste it to see if it is edible or tasty. For, what does a baby need more than food for its growth and health.

Then another person comes along with an even more beautiful walking-stick, all decorated with shiny coloured paper, and streamers, and so on—a very attractive stick. The baby is even more fascinated, and chews up all the decorations, and salivates the whole stick.

Another person comes along with a strong metallic stick, studded with glittering half-precious stones. He pushes the stick to the now almost bored baby, and says, "Use this, and chant 'Stick, stick, stick!' Go on chanting, OK, don't stop!" The baby goes "Ga ga..."

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Another, even cleverer person, comes with a walker (or, some say, a wheel-chair), and puts the baby on it, and pushes him around. The baby enjoys the rush of the wind and movements. Suddenly, he falls off the wheel-chair, and hurts himself. The man sheepishly steals away, leaving the crying baby behind.

The parents come along and look at the baby lovingly and simply says: “Come, my dear!” And the baby quickly crawls to them. Over time, he walks, and then run into the loving parents’ open arms.

A part of us is still like that baby who is curious about the sticks and the silly sounds that adults make to babies. But such babies tend sit in the same spot playing with the stick or listening to silly sounds or falling and hurting themselves. These babies never learn to walk.

The point is that we do not need all those sticks or silly sounds or complicated vehicles. All we need to do is stand on our own two feet, find some balance, and keep putting one foot before the other. Before long, we have learned to walk!

Of course, this is easier when we hear the Buddha’s compassionate voice calling us, “Come.”

10.5 Keep Buddhism Simple—and Effective

The Buddha teaches in very simple ways. For example, to meditate on colours, you only need to look at a hibiscus (for red), or cassia flowers (for yellow). Then during the Commentarial Period (about 500-700 years after the Buddha), special “colour discs” and ritualistic theories were introduced.

Now in our times, meditation is made to become more exotic with all kinds of new fancy names and gadgets—and very high prices. Even then, often you do not get the real thing.

Once a student of mine told me that he spent over \$10,000 for his family to learn a commercial meditation, but when he discovered Buddhist meditation, he remarked that the methods are not only simple and effective, but more detailed (and cheaper) than the commercial ones!

So let us return to “mere Buddhism” the simple teachings and ways of the Buddha himself.

This goes for Buddhist teachings on the dying and the dead: let us find out how simple and effective mere Buddhists deal with these issues by study the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇī Sutta (A 10.177 = SD 2.6a).

10.6 Buddhism is About Patterns

Buddhism is about observing patterns in our minds and in life, and to go on to discover why the pattern exists. The first clear undeniable pattern, whether we are religious or scientific-minded, no matter what religion we belong to, or to none, is that everything in the universe is impermanent.

Whatever is impermanent can never fully satisfy us, and if something is not fully satisfactory, it is simply unsatisfactory. In other words, we really have no control over it. In short, there is no unchanging entity, no eternal self or God. Everything is in a flux. Only impermanence is permanent, but that is just a way of talking.

Understanding impermanence is the open secret to understanding the Buddha’s Teaching and the key to spiritual liberation in this life itself. It is simple as that. But in the centuries after the Buddha, many lost themselves in reinventing the Buddha wheel:

The Buddha has become a statue and bone relics.

The Dharma has become rituals, chants, and statistics.

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The Sangha has become royalty and expert rule-benders of various degrees.

Buddhism has become externalized and commodified. Every temple and foreign mission is arguably about money first, and Buddhism is just an excuse. That is why political correctness is imperative; otherwise, it is bad for business. Buddhism is big business today: see how expensive some Buddhist ceremonies and books are.

(The Buddha knows that all this would happen: just look at the prophetic Suttas in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. He has left some internal safety devices, as is evident here.)

The point is that **Buddhism is simple**. It is *a matter of mind*: of looking within and seeing impermanence. It is *the mind of the matter*: look around yourself, and you may notice how much we superimpose our preconceived notions and hopes onto what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. We almost never try to see things as they really are.

We stop noticing patterns almost as soon as we leave behind our childhood with all its wonderfully insatiable curiosities. Remember the first time you saw a rainbow or a starry heaven, moonless and cloudless. (Do you remember how you felt the first time you met your loved one?) It's never too late for little joys like these. They remind us of a greater happiness bigger than any notion of self or God.

It is easy to become megalomaniac, psychotic or violent if we strongly believe in a God-idea. It is easier to be selfless, mentally healthy and peaceful when we are truly *happy*.

The answer lies in living in the stillness of the present moment. It's all we can really do. Even to *speak* about it is to miss the point: in fact, we often talk too much and becoming deaf to others.

Notice that whatever we say is *always about something past or something future*. The *now* is gone the moment we talk about it.

In fact, you can't really say anything about the present moment. You will miss it if you do. You can only joyfully *live* it.

Scientific laws and rules may change, must change; but not the Dharma: *everything in the universe is impermanent*. That is why Buddha Dharma matters more to me than anything else. Look out for those patterns, and you will know what the Buddha is talking about.

10.7 Buddhism with Feeling

One of my favourite similes for Sutta study is that of classical music (or your favourite kind of music). Teaching the Suttas is like playing your special musical instrument. You practise, learn new pieces, consult the masters and ancient documents, practise again and again. Then you play before the audience with all the feeling you have.

Listening to the Suttas or discussing the Dharma is like listening to a musical recital. For the best effect, you sit calmly and quietly, and let the Dharma sink in. And, oh yes, you must completely switch off your hand-phones. (Just imagine a phone going off in a classical music hall!)

The Suttas are like a musical score. The teacher is a sort of performer, and he gives his best performance, less in technical brilliance, but more with deep feelings. If the ambience is right and the audience still enough, the beauty and spirit of the ancient music is transmitted to you.

You have to listen with your heart. As you listen with the still silence of your heart, the various recitals begin to fall into place like

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heavenly jigsaw pieces, and your life becomes all the richer.

All this is easy to understand as Buddhism is not a person-centred or guru-centric teaching, but a Dharma-centred (or mind-centred) practice. The True Dharma is found in the stillness between the musical notes.

But it's good to listen to the masters first and study the music scores. For, one day it will be your turn to perform before your own audience.

Till then, let us be at the TMC Dharma concert chamber and listen to the Buddha Word—with feeling. Join us in on a beautiful and musical Dharma journey into inner space.

10.8 Dogmas are Harmful to Mental Health

What are dogmas? Firstly, they are opinions, that is, a teaching, belief or rule laid down by a person or group which others have to accept without question.

The Buddha began his religious life with the great questions of life: What is life? Why suffering? How to end suffering? What is happiness? After the Buddha's awakening, he advises his followers to continue questioning in this manner.

To question effectively, we have to observe carefully. They are inseparable. This careful observation is famously known as "mindfulness." Meditation is as important as a very effective way of observation or mindfulness which prepares us for a direct knowledge and vision of true reality.

What are our tools for observation? There are six of them: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The eye sees form, the ear hears sounds, the nose smells odours, the tongue tastes, the body feels

touches, and the mind manages all these experiences and also has its own mental images.

What can we observe? We can only observe the sense-objects: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mind processes. Whatever happens, can only happen within these six sense-fields. This is not to say that nothing exists beyond the six senses and the six sense-objects. For example, even if I were to close my eyes, or were to go away, my room will still be there.

The point is such situations or problems are for philosophical discussion. They have no function in the awakening process leading to mental liberation. That process lies in understanding how the six senses and the six sense-objects work in our consciousness.

When we do this, we find that our consciousness (here it is easier if we limit it to “attention”) tries to go a thousand ways. We easily become distracted. If you are observant enough, you will notice that our attention would mostly go into the past, and sometimes into the future, but rarely lives in the present moment!

Understanding this uprooted nature of our consciousness is the beginning of knowledge and vision of true reality. In terms of practice, all Buddhist teachings lead to one thing: present-moment awareness. Watch the present moment, and do so again and again, and carefully. What do we see?

If our ideas are fixed or our minds unclear, we will only see the shifting shadows of the past, and blinding colours of the future, and these can be very noisy. When we focus on the present moment (such as doing breath meditation), these shadows, colourings and noises recede into the background, settling like dirt in settled water. Our minds become calmer and clearer.

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There are various ways of talking of what we see in the calm and clarity of the present moment. One popular way in the Suttas is that of the five aggregates. All that we can know and see are as follows:

- (1) The body: this is impermanent, changing all the time, becoming other than what we wish.
- (2) When there is a body, there are feelings (like, dislike, neutral).
- (3) These feelings arise dependent of how we recognize our present sense-experiences: when we relate it to something nice in the past, we interpret it as “nice,” and so on. The present quickly becomes the past.
- (4) We are caught in this opinion-cycle, and keep on forming new opinions, which are often biased by like, dislike, or unconcern.
- (5) All this happens as long as we direct our consciousness to them.

Considering all this dynamics, we should be able to understand why there are no dogmas in Buddhism. Because Buddhism is a life-long learning process. Try watching how a baby learns to walk. He has no dogmas: it just keeps on trying to walk, no matter how many times it falls, he gets up, and keeps moving. Then he walks and finally grows up into you!

10.9 Feeling is the Root of Religion

People turn to religion very often with an emotional baggage or personal agenda. It's rare to meet a very religious person who is not opinionated. In fact, the more religious or learned we are in a religion, the more opinionate we are (including myself, of course,

lest I am misunderstood otherwise). One important reason for this is that we tend to feel secure (mostly falsely) with the certainty of an idea (like God will save me or the Buddha will protect me.)

Opinions are only the symptom of a deep-rooted problem: we often think too much. We have forgotten how to feel. Feeling, says the Buddha, is at the root of all religion; feeling is the starting point of all religions. Please spend some time reflecting on this, and you will begin to be amazed at the Buddha's profound and disarming wisdom.

Understand our feelings, how we feel, we begin to understand ourselves.

Nevertheless, despite our cosmic opinion of ourselves (whether we are “humble” or “honest” about it), there always lurks in us that uneasy desire to learn and re-learn, to discover that secret of happiness to burst through the veneer of self-importance than cling like a cataract over our mind's eye.

So there is hope: we have only a little dust in our eye. All right, may be a lot of dust, but we can still blink our eyes, and if we look straight and focussed enough we will see the Buddha before us. The learning continues. Life is really fun then.

A remarkably interesting set of stories relates how a king (Pasenadi) uses all his royal tricks to outwit his own citizens in giving the “incomparable giving” to the Buddha. (But then again whose suggestion is it anyway?) The Indian storytellers have a great way with words: This is the greatest thing in the whole universe and beyond, they will tell you. And then in the same breath, they will say, OK, but here is something even greater!

One thing I've learned from translating the early Suttas for the last seven years, is not to take words too seriously. It is what words point to that is life-changing. Scholars split hairs over words—and

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get paid for it. Western Buddhists would split infinitives to rid themselves of the Biblical baggage they are born with. Our best friend is the child in us that is always eager to learn.

10.10 Bowing

One of the first things I learned about Buddhism is bowing. As I grew older, I learned that when we bow, we respect the wisdom of the Three Jewels. The first time we bow, we recollect the Buddha's compassion, the second the Dharma's wisdom, and thirdly the Sangha's virtue.

During my five years' training as a monk in Thailand, I noticed people regularly bow to monks and to each other with their palms in *anjali* (lotus-like). In fact, I found that Buddhist practitioners of all traditions often bow to each other.

I also found out why Buddhists generally do not shake hands (though they may do so with non-Buddhists). Shaking hands began in the ancient wars in the west. When the armies wanted a truce, or to stop fighting, they extended their right hand (the weapon hand) to the other side.

But then I also read that either side could cheat. The left ("sinister") hand could hide a weapon and be used to attack the enemy! Clearly, the *anjali* is a better gesture of peace. We put both palms together. When both hands are clasped, there is no chance for any underhand trick: we really show respect to the other person.

Here "respect" means we bow to the person reminding him that he has the potential to be better and happier than he is now, even to become Buddha, if he wishes to.

It is not a matter of who is senior or junior, that junior should bow to senior first. (Traditionally, it is said that the Buddha is one who

often greets others first.) We bow to the Dharma-potential or Buddha-seed in the person. Every time we bow to a person, we are silently saying: “Hey, you can be better and happier. You can awaken in this life. You can even become Buddha, if you wish to!”

In fact, when we bow before a Buddha image or some kind of Buddhist symbol, we are also reminding ourselves of our personal potential for good and awakening like the Buddha.

I was (still am) deeply moved when I saw a 2003 newspaper picture of Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong putting his palms together in anjali (or the colloquial Chinese “bai”). It was the height of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic. He took pains to explain that this was a good way of greeting one another, as it is universally Asian, and also a healthy way of doing it as we need not have bodily contact. During the 2009 Chinese New Year period, I saw another picture of SM Goh “bai-ing” to some people. It’s inspiring to see that he is still showing a good local example.

Once I met the local leader of a large foreign Buddhist mission, a VIP layman who was shaking hands with everybody at a Buddhist temple. When he came to me to shake my hands, I put my palms in anjali, and told him this is how we should do it! He seemed surprised. Maybe foreign missions need to “go native”!

Occasionally, I will go to the Shuang Lin temple in Toa Payoh to give talks to various Dharma camps. There was one occasion when, as soon as I got out of the taxi, I bowed before the first shrine I saw. The student who chaperoned me told me that it was actually a Daoist temple. (It was located right next to the Shuang Lin temple.)

I told him it was all right for me, because when I bow, I think of the Buddha. So I am bowing to the Buddha—which reminds of me a story a Sikh once told me. A Sikh was sitting with his legs pointing to a holy shrine in India, and a Hindu priest scolded him saying he should not point his legs to “God.” The Sikh replied: “That’s hard!

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God is everywhere. So tell me where I can point my feet where there is no God!”

Even so, whenever I bow, wherever I bow to, I think of the Buddha. I do not have a Buddha statue on my home shrine because I keep giving them away to people who needed an image for themselves. I only have a beautiful Kannon given to me by a Japanese teacher before he left for Japan. Although I am more inclined to early Buddhism than any religion, I enjoy bowing before Kannon (Japanese Guanyin) who embodies the Buddha’s compassion.

Guanyin is Buddha in my mind. When I see a cross, too, I feel like bowing because it represents four spokes of the Dharma Wheel! When I see an empty niche in a mosque, I am reminded of the true emptiness that the Dharma leads to. When I see the numerous Hindu gods, I think, wow! the Buddha is the Teacher of all such gods. Aren’t we such a big spiritual family!

My youngest nephew, Chai Cheng, too, has an inspiring story of faith to tell. His father was forcefully converted into Christianity in his teens, and grew up to be a church elder. When my nephew was still schooling, although he was inclined to Buddhism, his father insisted that he attended church (as a “family tradition”).

Reluctantly but dutifully, he joined in the Sunday church prayers. He told me that he would mentally recite words like “Namo tassa...” throughout the service. And as soon as it was over, he would cycle half way across town, just in time for the Buddhist Puja in a local temple, and be with the friends he really felt good with!

Let us constantly anjali to each other in the Dharma.

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Note: For David Attenborough’s response to hate-mails from creationists, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/27/david-attenborough-science>.

10.11 The Horse's Teeth

In every age of our civilized history, we have two kinds of teachers: those who want to control our minds and those who help us to free it. One common feature of all religions, especially the God-religions, is that its preachers want us to fully believe in what he says and do as he says.

There is a big problem here. There are thousands of groups of God-believers, even within a single God-religion. One honest God-believing theologian once quipped: We all believe in the same God, but we are hating and cursing at each other in the name of the same God!

Even as far back as the times of Elizabeth I of England or during the Ming dynasty in China, we have thinkers who spoke out against the limiting habits of religion and for the freeing of the mind so that it can really think for itself to see true reality, and not religious dogma or virtual reality.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Lord Chancellor of England, in one of his books published early in the 17th century reprinted a passage that he had found in the records of a Franciscan friary. This passage from 1432 relates how a group of friars tried to figure out how many teeth a horse had in its mouth. It is a good example of the "old" way of doing science.

In the year of our Lord 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For 13 days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition, such as was never before heard of in this region, was made manifest.

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At the beginning of the 14th day, a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonderment of the disputants, whose wisdom he sore vexed, he beseeched them to unbend in a manner coarse and unheard-of, and to look in the open mouth of a horse and find answer to their questionings.

At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceedingly wroth; and, joining in a mighty uproar, they flew upon him and smote him hip and thigh, and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding the truth contrary to all the teachings of the fathers.

After many days more of grievous strife the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they as one man, declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a grievous dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down.

(Francis Bacon, 1592, in CEK Mees, "Scientific thought and Social Reconstruction," *American Scientist* 22 (1934): 13-24)

Most Buddhists would laugh or at least smile at this story, because we pride in the view that Buddhism teaches us to think for ourselves and to free our minds, and so be rid of suffering. And we are surely right in thinking so. Buddhism teaches us to know our minds, tame our minds, and free our minds,

But this is easier said than done. For if we follow any guru's teachings today, we will sooner or later, want to claim that *only* our guru's words are true. But we well know that after the Buddha's time, various Buddhisms arose. While such Buddhisms might be inspired by the Buddha, for various reasons they were compelled to

adapt various Buddhist teachings to answer local challenges or for their own sectarian purposes.

Even within Theravada, too, after the Buddha Buddhism, for example, became more and more rigid and scholastic in its approach. Instead of learning to free our minds, we memorize and repeat concepts after concepts. Often we feel that only our method is right or the best, and all else is wrong.

There is nothing wrong in having views: after all, knowledge is language-based and provisional. But we should investigate carefully why we hold such views. For this reason (and not for this alone), for example, the Mahā Kamma Vibhaṅga Sutta¹⁸ (M 136) warns us against the notion that only we are right and “all else is wrong.”

Some however have conveniently misconstrued this statement to mean that we can claim what we like of Buddhism. (This is actually more “I”ism or “I”-pod philosophy, than Buddha Dharma.) This is where, for example, people speak for the Buddha rather than letting the Buddha’s Teachings speak for themselves (for example, by studying the early Suttas).

So what does Buddhism teach us here? First, we begin to learn things on a “word” level (using language and concepts). Then we continue to “think” for ourselves to test if such concepts and practices are true and useful. Then in due course we try to “directly experience” more and more of true reality for ourselves (especially through mindfulness practice and meditation). This is the beginning of the liberation of the heart leading to wisdom.

Let us not be blinded by the light, but let us awaken with it.

¹⁸ M 136/3:207-214 = SD 4.16: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.6-Maha-Cunda-S-a06.46-piya.pdf>

10.12 The Best Stories are Unfinished

There is an important difference between art and truth. It is the same significant difference that separates literature and religion (or better spirituality). Art and literature, for example, try to present truth through stories (or narratives, as they say). We feel pleased when we like the story.

But we often stop there: a story pleases us and that's it. We tend to take Buddhism, too, as a story. It pleases us, or rather a certain aspect of it, our perception of it pleases us, and we forget about the rest, especially the most important aspect of it.

Take the story of the dog-tooth relic, for example. A young man goes on a pilgrimage to Gaya, and his old mother asks him to bring back a Buddha relic from there. He completes his pilgrimage but forgets his mother's request. So along the way, he finds the skull of a dead dog and takes one of its teeth and gives it to his mother.

His mother joyfully worships it and a rainbow appears over their house. Prayers are answered, and more people come and more prayers are answered. The dog-tooth relic became a sensation and the house a holy place.

I find this story very troubling. For a simple reason, it is based on an outright lie, even if it is a pious one. Such a story may be misconstrued that it is all right to lie, if it is to make someone happy. Perhaps, if we limit the moral to "filial piety", it is less the moral problem.

The point is that there is, in fact, a better way for the story to end. I would have retold the story in this way. The young man returns home with the dog-tooth and openly tells his mother: "Mom, there are no more Buddha relics available in Bodhgaya. But I found this beautiful bone in the holy land. As you know if you regard this as

symbolizing the Buddha, it becomes a relic ‘image’ (like a Buddha image).”

If the mother is really full of faith, (which is very likely the case), then she would not be too concerned with this rationalization. It is from the holy land, anyway. Moreover, it is based on truth, and is not a commercializing attempt.

During the recent “Buddha” relic controversy with the Buddha Relic Temple, the abbot there answered something like: Since I take it to be a Buddha relic, it *is* a Buddha relic. We call this “reifying” the Buddha. Sadly such an ultimatum tends to divide us into thinkers and non thinkers, into wisdom versus faith.

There is an important difference between a “good” story and a “wholesome” story. A good story moves you into the author’s bias; a wholesome story moves you to goodness. An author maybe biased by greed, hate or delusion. Goodness frees you from greed, hate, and delusion.

The point is that the word is not the thing. Otherwise, anyone reading the word would come to the same conclusion. We come to our own conclusions depending on whether we have greed, hate or delusion, or non-greed non-hate, non-delusion.

If you do not like what I have written here: ask yourself why? If you like what I have written here: ask yourself why, too.

You will find your own answer and liberation there, not in the words. We have to listen beyond the words, to the truth.

10.13 Why Buddhism is Boring (For Some)?

We are basically controlled by unconscious or latent tendencies of liking and disliking: we are victims of the push and pull effect.

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Things we have experienced as “pleasant” when we were young tend to register a “pull” effect when we perceive a similar experience. What we remember as “unpleasant” in the past is likely to be projected onto a similar experience. All this is done in an autopiloted manner. In meditation lingo, this is called “the mental hindrance of sensual desire.”

The mental hindrance of sensual desire unconsciously makes us “measure” others. You will notice that within moments of meeting someone, we already have a notion whether “I am better than...,” or “I am inferior to...” (“He is better than me...”), or “I am as good as (this person).” If we allow ourselves to be goaded on by this primal instinct, we are likely to fall under the weight of our own conceit (that is what is called in Buddhism). Just as we are averse to others judging us, it works the same the other way around.

The skill to cultivate here is to meet people as if we are meeting them the first time, especially people we think we know well (including family).

Sensual desire also reflects a deep lack or need of some desirable quality. We often project this need onto some favourable or iconic figure, usually someone we perceive as successful, powerful or famous. This is “charisma,” that is, the projection of what we see as desirable qualities onto others.

There is a whole discourse, the *Ādhipateyya Sutta* (A 3.40) where the Buddha advises us against simply following others by charisma. For, this is usually a false projection, when we should be cultivating the positive qualities within ourselves. In the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* (M 47), the Buddha advises his followers to even carefully examine if he (the Buddha himself) has traits of greed, hate or delusion.

Conversely, the Buddha is implying that we should examine if we ourselves have at least toned down or healthily suppressed (as

against “repressed”) our own greed, hate and delusion, and also our fear, pride and conceit. Liberating wisdom begins with self-knowing.

When I was a monk, one of my “vocational hazards” was meeting very conceited people. Once I met young man who came up to me and asked if I was “awakened.” Obviously, this youth was new to Buddhism! “Why do you ask?” I replied. “Oh,” he said, “only if you are awakened you can be my teacher.” “Oh,” I replied, “what makes you think I want you as my student in the first place.” It was a sort of wake-up call for him, you might say.

So Buddhism is boring for some of us because we have already decided what awakening is, or we think we already know what the Dharma is. And what we want is to have others present the Dharma just the way we like it. Our learning has stopped, we only want to be entertained.

The solution to this sad self-limiting rut is not a difficult one. Simply ask ourselves, “*Why* do I find this teaching (note this “process,” not “person”) boring?” Do not attempt to answer it intellectually: let your heart speak for itself. When the answer finally comes, you will surprise yourself to know that you have such great potential to see the Dharma in a most interesting way.

I have always found Buddhism interesting, even when spoken by the most boring person. The most important thing is that I make sure I do not bore myself. The Dharma and Suttas make sure of that!

11 THE EGO AND SELFLESSNESS

11.1 Meme (That's "Me Me" Always!)¹⁹

Scientists, like Richard Dawkins, have noticed that the way that ideas and constructs spread amongst individuals and groups follow the laws of selective adaptation that govern the evolution of species. Just as genes transmit biological and other characteristics of a species, a *meme* transfers ideas by replicating itself.

An idea, for example, is widely propagated, not because it is good, but simply because it is a successful reproducer. A very good example is that of an evangelical religion that discourages critical thinking and encourages aggressive proselytization: it is a virulent *memeplex* (a complex of memes), in that it encourages *self-replication*. In short, memes function to make exact copies of themselves.

Of all the memes, *religion* itself, as a memeplex, is the most selfish of all. Religion often not only wants to replicate itself, but at the same time, often hopes to destroy any and all rivals. In this sense, religion—especially those that are intolerant of others—is the most narcissistic of belief systems, since it only wants to draw others' attention to itself, and to deny others, or at best to rationalize other systems on its own terms. In this sense, such a religion is a form of *profound psychological denial*.

Since *denial* is an unconscious defence mechanism, we must make every effort to understand religion as such, so that we do not fall into the rut of a very private and limited reality. We need to humbly

¹⁹ This is an excerpt from Piya Tan's essay on "Memes: The idea of sam-saric genes." See SD 26.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.3-Memes-piya.pdf>

accept *religious denial* as a personal problem, as a human problem, one that can easily infect others, and in a very widely destructive manner, as religious history has repeatedly shown.²⁰

We often construct our God, Gods, and gods, and our demons in our image. We also construct our own Buddha, Buddhas, Bodhi-sattvas and deities according to our needs. In a sense, we must not deny our own demons, nor do we need to live with them for eternity. When we think that our Gods and Buddhas have failed to give us what we want, we helplessly seek solutions outside of ourselves, falling under power of our senses—this is the nature of lust, of *sense-desire*. It is a refusal or failure to see within ourselves (and similarly in others) the potential for good and liberation.

To deny others spiritually—such as regarding them as “sinners,” or as caste members, or as outside the tribe—is the greatest violence we can incur upon them. We have laid the basis for justified and continued *ill-will* towards them, and hence, it is right, even holy, to destroy these “others”! For this reason, Buddhists train themselves to learn to *unconditionally* accept others, especially those who are in some way different.

Once we relegate all our spiritual potential to the idea of a single supreme power that is outside of us—once we build the Temple of God externally, as it were—we will fall into the *mental sloth and torpor* of not working out our own salvation, but expecting an external force to do this for us. This is as if we are sick, but expecting others to find us and give us the medicine without our ever seeking it ourselves and taking it ourselves. When we disempower ourselves, we stop thinking; we close the door to wisdom; we are blind to self-liberation. We feel ever and deeply tired, always in

²⁰ See **How Buddhism Became Chinese** = SD 40b.3 (3.1); also **Gadgrabha S** (A 3.81) = SD 24.10b Intro (2.4.2); See also: **Me: The nature of conceit** = SD 19.2a (3.2).

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need of God's succour. We have fallen into a profound state of *emotional dependence*. Hence, it is said: God helps those who help themselves; or, put in a non-mythical way: *you can help yourself only if you really try*.

On the other hand, if we take this self-denial very seriously, and in a systematic way (such as in a polemical denial of others), we will always be in the grip of *restlessness and remorse*. We feel as if our "souls" are restless until we have served our God, our master, or our religion, often by denying or destroying unbelievers. When we *think* we have failed, or have disobeyed a commandment, we *feel* a terrible guilt, a total lack of self-worth. We have simply lost touch with our potential to rise from our self-constructed subhuman states.

The most harmful of the mental hindrances to opening our minds to spiritual liberation is that of *doubt*, that is, the inability to look within and see the self-constructed virtual phantoms of lust, ill will, lack, and guilt. What is construed as *faith* is often simply a deep commitment to denying that these phantoms exist. *True spiritual faith* arises when we see through all these self-constructions and memes we have been infected with.

There will come a time in our long cosmic history when we would understand *the true nature of religion*, just as our ancestors have emerged from the superstition that earth, water, fire and wind were gods or demons. Two and a half millennia ago, the Buddha gave us that liberating knowledge, but we are rapidly forgetting it. We have watered it down, severely adulterated, modernized and commodified it into local cults, privatized systems, and monetary missions, so that we are losing our best tool for spiritual liberation. Yet, if we look deeply enough, underneath and beyond all the sectarian divides, pious concoctions, and religious materialism, we might just catch a liberating glimpse of true reality.

11.2 It's Okay to Have a Big Ego

The most important fact I know about myself is that I have a *big* ego, and that's all I really have (that is "mine") at the moment. And I'm not sure what to do about it exactly.

I want to be a serious scholar, a skilled meditator, a calm wise person, even if it means having to deal with a big ego. I think that's what being a Buddhist is about. There are those who talk about big ego, and there are those who work with it.

Self-effacement is also a form of ego trip. In fact, I think it is one of the biggest of ego trips. Self-effacement is saying "worthless" things about ourselves before others can say them to us. It is not talking too much about ourselves so that people do not really know us.

A cunning strategy is to hint that we know what others are thinking. In other words, we are saying, "I'm actually better than you and putting you in your place!" Such strategy understandably is common where "face" and status are important.

Humility shown is hidden pride. True humility is when we give space to others.

So there seems to be no way out: be proud, you are ego-bound; be humble, you are ego-bound, too.

Even a streamwinner may have a "big" ego in the eyes of the unawakened. Arhats by definition have no ego. But would we know an arhat even if we met one? We are only in the habit of canonizing our own arhats.

In the Saṅghāṭi,kaṇṇa Sutta (It 92 = SD 24.10a), the Buddha says that even if we were to hold on to the corner of his robe and follow him step for step, we would still be far away from him, if we still have greed, hate or delusion (if we still have an ego). The teaching is

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that we cannot “look” for arhats, but we can only cultivate ourselves to *become* one. Only then we would know another arhat.

The point is that we all have big egos, but there are those who know about it and those who do not.

The Buddha teaches that we will never be free from suffering, never even attain streamwinning, if we are stuck in selfishness. For, selfishness spurs us on to perform rituals, that is, get stuck in predictable behaviour which we think would bring us what we desire. Selfishness makes us superstitious, that is, we think that by changing our external environment, we can better our internal space. But it just does not really work in these ways.

We begin to grow spiritually when we work at being less selfish, that is, to be more responsible for our actions and to be *responsive* to others, even when they do not deserve it. We continue to grow when we examine the *conditions* behind the way we think and feel, and remove those negative conditions and cultivate wholesome ones. We grow closer to streamwinning when we work with our hearts and minds so that they become more *calm and clear*.

Our Dharma practice protects us from life’s dangers like a safety airbag in a car. When the car crashes, the airbag inflates and safely cushions us. This happens whenever there is an accident, and our lives can have accidents when we least expect them (that is why they are called “accidents”).

It is very troubling when someone with a big ego pretends that it is small or, worse, that there is none at all. It is like remaining stuck behind the comfort of the fully inflated airbag after the car has smashed into a lamppost or wall. There is always the danger that the car may burst into flames.

In short, it's okay to have a big ego if we deal with it and do not feed it, and we should do this now and always, before any accident can happen.

11.3 Let Go of the "I"

This thought was on my mind just before awakening this morning.

It's amazing how my mind works on autopilot.

In fact, if I do not watch the present moment carefully,

I am nothing but a hazy shadow of my absent past
or a pale mirage of the unreal future,
both pushing me on to do this and that:
to like, to dislike, to ignore,
to think a thousand things.

I think I have really understood Buddhism: this is just a thought.

I think I have found the best meditation: this is just a thought.

I think I have the right teacher: this is just a thought.

I think others are wrong: this is just a thought.

I think I am successful: this is just a thought.

I think I am happy: this is just a thought.

I think I am not.

I think I am.

I think.

I.

It's time to let go of the I.

11.4 All Views are Wrong Views²¹

An argumentative brahmin (member of the priestly class in ancient India) approaches the Buddha and tells him “I do not accept everything!” That is, he has no views. The Buddha’s reply is short and exact, “That, brahmin, is a view, too!” (Dīgha,nakha Sutta, M 74)²²

Whenever we say something (including writing it, or communicating it in any other way), we are saying that “I am right in saying this.” Even when we say, “I am wrong,” we are saying we are right. One of the most ironic statements we can make is perhaps saying, “I am not saying this”! And saying all this, we are asserting that “I am telling the truth.”

My point is that words tend to give us a wrong view of things. We can never express the whole truth or true reality in words. The moment we say something, we are leaving out what the words do not say. The problem is that words forms our most common way of communicating.

We can of course use pictures to communicate, but they have their own problems. A picture may say a thousand words. And that is just the problem! It is a 1000 words too many. There will be a 1000 opinions about that one picture.

Even when we try to say, like the good brahmin of the Dīgha,nakha Sutta, that “I have no opinion on this,” we are not really telling the truth. For, that statement itself is an opinion! The real reason is perhaps we rather not say anything, as it is likely to get us into trouble. This often happens when we are confronted by a strong personality with closed mind or a person with a very negative emotion.

²¹ Related reading: The Person in Buddhism, SD 29.6b.

²² Dighanakha Sutta (M 74 = SD 16.1).

Sometimes someone may pick a single sentence, or even a single word, a single tree or even a single twig from a jungle of words and try to chop it down. They are really upset about a single remark we have made. From my years of public teaching, I find that such people tend to be intellectually inclined and have strong opinions. Unfortunately, strong opinions tend to be walled in by a closed mind so that it is closed to everything else.

There are a couple of interesting issues here. Firstly, the critic does not seem to have been moved by the rest of what we have said, but is fixated on that one particular point. A zealous young Muslim boy once attended a talk I gave in a tertiary institution Buddhist society. During question time, he at once stood up and challenged me that the Buddha was only a man, so how could he liberate us, and that his religion was the only true one.

Realizing that we could never reach a common ground, I told him calmly, "You are right!" He went on making a few more strong statements, and each time I said, "You are right!" In the end he was silent. No, I was not lying when I said he was right. He *thinks* he was right, and I simply agreed with him. As he is unable to get into any useful dialogue, I left it at that for the sake of religious and general harmony.

If a Buddhist student falls into a similar rut of fixated opinion, and he challenges me, my reply would be that he has to ask himself really honestly and carefully *why* he asks such a question, or have such an opinion. There is so much he is able to learn from this self-examination.

My point is that our opinions change in due course. Over the last fifty years or so that I have been a Buddhist, my opinions of Buddhism have often changed, sometimes drastically. However, I certainly think that I know Buddhism better now than ever before.

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By that very same token, I tell myself, I could be wrong or at best partially right in my current views. In time to come, I will know more than I do know. This is the evolution of our spiritual maturity. If we allow that we could be wrong now, we have a better chance to be right. We become more open to wisdom.

Then there will come a time when we really know we do not have any views. Unfortunately or fortunately, we cannot put this into words: it would be self-contradictory. When I say, "I have no views," I am stating my view! A samsaric tautology.

When we have no views, we will naturally be silent about it. I think this is what is meant by the saying, "Right view is having no view," which the parable of the raft tries to express in the Alagaddûpama Sutta (M 22)²³.

Oh yes, some might think that being silent is best, but this is problematic if you have nothing to be silent about. Only when you truly have no opinion, can you really be silent and at peace. For the moment, let me suggest we work at this reflection: *Right view is not about who is right, who is wrong; it is about becoming a better and happier person.*

11.5 What is the Most Difficult Thing to Give Up?

Buddhists are generally known to be amongst the most generous people around. When there is an earthquake somewhere, we generously send help there. When there is a tsunami somewhere, we readily donate for their relief funds. We go to Myanmar or Kampuchea and help the poor and the needy. In fact, helping and giving to others are meritorious and fun.

²³ M 22 = SD 3.13: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/3.13-Alagaddupama-S-m22-piya.pdf>

There are a number of suttas that address the question of why we really give: See for example the (Maha-p,phala) Dāna Sutta (A 7.49)²⁴. In all such teachings, there is one clear message: The best thing you can “ask” for is “a beautiful mind” that helps in mental focus, for, this is what will really help you to overcome suffering in this life itself. Other wishes, no matter how noble, only keep you within samsara and suffering.

However, you can never get this “beautiful mind” without giving up something. That is, wrong view, or keep the mind open and not stuck to an indeed no matter how noble, whether this is about liberating all beings, or becoming a future Buddha, or becoming a monk or nun (think carefully what really is your motive for this), or receiving the approval (positive strokes) of others.

So what is the most difficult thing to give up? Our opinions. When you begin to let go of your opinions (it becomes easier as you start doing it), you begin to understand why people (Buddhists especially) behave the way they do. This knowledge is very painful at first, but with growing wisdom, the pains lessen and the ability to help grows.

One of the easiest ways of letting go of opinions (not all at once, understandably), is through reflecting on the Suttas. When this study goes with mindfulness practice, a lot of wonderful things happen: the best is gaining streamwinning in this itself.

Whatever you are thinking now, try letting that go for a while, and ask yourself: “What is this message trying to say?”

The brahmin Kūṭa,danta²⁵ was open enough to ask the Buddha about something that is central to the brahmin’s life, that is, the

²⁴ (Maha-p,phala) Dāna Sutta (A 7.49 = SD 2.3).

²⁵ See Kūṭa,danta Sutta D 5 = SD 22.8.

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ritual sacrifice. His openness brought him greater blessings than all his status and opinions could.

True giving help in the letting go of the idea of the self.

12 SOCIAL MATURITY

12.1 What Vesak Means to Me

Vesak Day is when my family and I would visit some obscure and uncrowded Buddhist temple (usually one we have not been to before), where we could enjoy the peace as we remind ourselves of this most sacred day.

In 1950, the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) declared Vesak Day to fall on the first full moon day of May. In other words, it is an *uposatha* or precept day. It is a day when we put more effort to keep at least the five precepts, by spending quiet time with the family, or keeping in touch with the Dharma, or alone meditating.

It is a day to keep in touch with our own self, away from the mad-ding crowd. Those who share the same ideal can gather together to do this, too, and have Sutta Study and other retreat-like activities. In this way we will taste the true spirit of Vesak.

Vesak celebrates the Buddha's birthday. He was born a human being like any of us. This means that any of us can become Buddha if we want to, which is effectively becoming the most evolved of beings within a certain world-cycle. Or, it is like being the captain of a huge ship. If we cannot be the captain, it is good enough to be a good crew all journeying towards true liberation.

Vesak Day secondly marks "Buddha Day," that is the awakening of Gotama to true reality and becoming the Buddha. What does

awakening (*bodhi*) mean? *Biological evolution* brings us to the highest level of growth as a species or group. Then we have to develop as individuals, that is, go through *the spiritual evolution*. While biological evolution brings us beyond the animal and sub-human levels, spiritual evolution brings us beyond the human and the divine so that we are truly liberated from all suffering, human or divine.

On the Buddha's *mahā,parinirvāna* (passing away), which is the third significance of Vesak, he reminds us to be "an island unto yourself; make the Dharma as an island" (D 16)²⁶. This means that we have the potential to be truly happy, and to be liberated from suffering. The answer to life's problems lies within our minds. The answer is not "out there," but *in here* (in our minds).

The Buddha's message is very simple: if we do not help ourselves, who can? Religion is mostly based on stories and our idea of imaginary things in which we are told to have faith. But the stillness of mind is something we can all experience, if we spend some quiet moments alone meditating, say, watching the breath.

When our mind is calm, it becomes clear. In that clarity, we will notice there are destructive as well as wholesome patterns of behaviour. Often getting angry is a destructive pattern of behaviour; so is being constantly sad or depressive. We should spend some quiet time, and question such mental patterns. Ask *why*, then some answer will appear in your mind; ask *why* again, and so on, until we come to understand what is really going on. This final part, we have to find out for ourselves.

Then there is the wholesome pattern that we should notice in ourselves. It makes us feel really peaceful and happy. And it is not dependent on anything outside of ourselves; for, such a state would

²⁶ Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16 = SD 9).

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be dependent on something else. We should seek for the non-dependent peaceful happiness within ourselves. Where does it come from? Seek and you will find it—in your heart.

Be at peace with your breath. It has always been there, trying to keep up with you. Just *let your breathing be* this time; joyfully observe it like you would watch a sleeping baby or a happy kitten or a colourful sunset.

The secret of Vesak is this: We can be truly happy by being **emotionally independent**: our happiness is not dependent on others or outside things or other people's ideas.

Buddhism, above all else, is about spiritual evolution. It is the transmission of stillness from the Buddha to us. Life's storm may rage around us, but there is always this eye of stillness where we are. This is the true meaning of Vesak.

May the spirit of Vesak be always be with you in the calm and clarity of your heart.

(As this is a reflection, you are invited to read it again so that you can relate to it. You might like to highlight sentences that you like, and reflect further on them.)

A very happy Vesak: may all good wishes be fulfilled and true happiness be yours!

12.2 Vesak Aspirations

Vesak Blessing of long life, beauty, happiness and strength to you.

Please join me in reflecting on the Buddha's advice to his chief lay donor, Anāthapindika, and other lay followers like ourselves, not only to do works of merit, but also to spend some time in self-cultivation:

(Anāthapiṇḍika) Pīti Sutta (A 5.176)

1 Then, the householder Anātha,piṇḍika, with a retinue of some five hundred laymen approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One, they saluted him and then sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the householder Anātha,piṇḍika said this to the Blessed One:

2 You, householder, have supported the order with robes, almsfood, lodgings, and support for the sick and medical requisites. But, householder, you should not feel satisfied just by the thought, “We have supported the order with robes, almsfood, lodgings, and support for the sick and medical requisites.”

Therefore, householder, you should train yourself thus: **[207]**

3 “Come now, let us, from time to time, attain and abide in the bliss of solitude.”²⁷

Thus, householder, you should train yourself.

(A 5.176/3:206 f) = SD 44.10

Having given in a generous, mindful, respectful, and timely manner, we earn great merit, which, *if we aspire so*, can become a support for our mental cultivation, which in turn brings about wisdom that free us from suffering in the life itself. Let us spend some quality time with ourself.

12.3 25 December: “Buddhist Renewal Day”

The religious situation here today is very similar to that in the Buddha’s own days. The public is exposed to many religious influences. As such, we often find the Buddha using terms very similar to the brahmins and other people of the times. For example:

²⁷ *Kinti mayaṃ kālena kālaṃ pavivekaṃ pītiṃ upasampajja vihareyyāma ti.*

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- (1) The Buddha uses “God” (Brahma): the brahmins claim only they can communicate with God, but the Buddha declares that “God” is within all of us. When we cultivate the 4 divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*, that is, lovingkindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity), we cultivate these godly qualities. (See Tevijja Sutta, D 13)
- (2) The brahmins claim that only their prayers work, not any other prayer; but the Buddha charges that if we are not morally virtuous what is the point of prayer, meaning that even evil people will have their prayers answered! Constantly reflecting on impermanence of all things in the world, the Buddha guarantees streamwinning (the path to ending suffering) here and now (see Saṃyutta ch 25).
- (3) The brahmins claim that purification comes through baptism (*nahataka*), but the Buddha declares that his disciple, through mental stillness, baptizes themselves in the waters of mindfulness and comes out dry! (That is, free from suffering) (Sn 646, 705).

Considering the prevalent influence of evangelistic teaching on our loved ones and friends in educational institutions, infusing them with their own religious values, let us work together to apply the Buddha’s open wisdom in seeing the True Dharma in the world.

In this connection I would like to propose and declare 25th December as “Buddhist Renewal Day,” when we should recite the Namo tassa, the Three refuges (and the Precepts, as you choose) (and do more, if you like). Let us from now on, as Buddhists, forever

associate “25 December” with “Buddhist Renewal Day” or “Tisarana Day,” if you like.²⁸

Let us celebrate the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, as the brahminee Dhananjani does in Dhānañjānī Sutta (S 7.1 = SD 45.5)

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13.1 Translating Suttas is Very Enjoyable

What is the difference between the Sutta Discovery (SD) translation series and scholarly academic works? There are some people who quip that the SD translation is “academic.” If they have not study these notes at all, then I suppose they are not interested in the Suttas, or maybe they think I’m not qualified to translate the texts.

So, who is qualified to translate the Suttas (or even *a* Sutta)? Notice the operative word, *qualified*. If we ask who *can* translate the Suttas, I suppose the answer is that anyone *can* try to. In fact, if you spend some time at the Buddhism section of any large bookshops, you may notice that many of the writers or “translators” are not Buddhists.

The Dhammapada, for example, has been translated over 50 times to date! And not all the “translators” are practising Buddhists or even know Pali. Some of the trickiest verses (and I mean cryptic, even ironic) of the Pali are found in the Dhammapada. (Compare the translations, especially of **Dh 97**, and you might be amazed at how each have effectively written their *own* Dhammapada!) One

²⁸ See how Christmas was originally a “pagan” festival, especially the winter solstice, and “converted” into Christian festival: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas#_ref-5

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reason for publishing such works in English is because Buddhist books are selling well today as Buddhism has become a global religion.

My interest in the Suttas started when I was an adolescent, seeking to study *all* the sacred texts of *all* the world's religions. I enjoyed this while the interest lasted, which was some 45 years ago. My first interest was the Bible, since my brother (forcibly converted when he was young) then ran a Gospel chapel.

Soon I realized that the Bible is mostly *stories*, which people consciously or unconsciously take to be facts. In due course, I found that **religion** is mostly *stories inspiring how we can be good*, and also how to *believe* in a certain system and not others. I began to look beyond stories and blind faith.

My first taste of the Suttas was not very sweet. The long unbroken and repetitive passages were difficult reading. So in mid-secondary school, I convinced my school teachers to switch me from the science stream to the arts stream—so that I could master English better. I did not say I planned to be a monk in due course: they might think I was unhinged or had a complex.

Anyway, my determination to know the Buddha's Suttas was strong. One reason is that the evangelists were constantly bullying and insulting us, even doing it on our sacred temple premises! My favourite reply was that it was God's will that I am a Buddhist!

But when I joined the Thai order, I had to study Thai first, because at that time (in the 1970s), there was no Pali courses in English easily available. In fact, I wished I had mastered Burmese and Sinhalese, too (perhaps next life). After the minimum 5 years of monastic training and Pali, I returned to Malaysia and Singapore, and began teaching.

A great change occurred when my family and I were invited to live in Singapore in 1999. When the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society (NUSBS, Feb **2002**) invited me to teach them Suttas, I was delighted. But soon we found the available translations were difficult to read, and lacked study notes. So I started preparing my own translation with notes, something like one Sutta a week.

Then the Buddhist Fellowship (BF, Feb **2003**), too, invited me to run weekly Sutta Discovery classes. By then, I had already been systematically producing a volume of annotated Sutta every 4 months. In **2004**, this was reduced to every 3 months, so that the volume is not too thick. These Sutta classes have continued unbroken to this very day.

One way to envision the Sutta Discovery series is that *it is like a cross between Reader's Digest and a learned journal*. First, I read up all the available English translations of the Sutta at hand, so that I do not duplicate what is already very good and give them due credit. Then, I look up all the journal articles and writings I can find on that Sutta (and often communicating with the scholars themselves).

Then, I translate the text directly from the Pali, at times, checking all the Pali readings from whatever manuscripts (Thai, Burmese, Sinhalese, European, even Sanskrit parallels). Thanks to the computer, IT and internet, all this are now easily done. Wherever possible, I paragraph, title and number them into sections, subsections, even lines, for easy reading, but I keep the repetitions intact where they serve a spiritual purpose (as Xuanzang did).

Then comes an enjoyable phase: we study these annotated translations at the NUSBS, the BF and other centres where I teach Suttas (often regularly over four days of the week). This helps to weed out typos and improve the Sutta notes. The joyful peace on the audience's faces is a reward in itself.

The main reason I have been consistently translating and teaching the Pali Suttas is that it is such a joyful thing to do, and to bring happiness to others, with the *real thing*. It's a simple choice: live my life by listening to others' opinions and jokes in talks, or master the Living Word of the Buddha directly.

13.2 Degree of Happiness

More than once, I have heard people tell me that the suttas are "academic." At first, I found this confusing, as "academic" is a good word which has to do with learning, especially deep learning, the first stage of Buddhist training. What is confusing is that the word "academic" is used in a negative sense. The sense, whether the speaker is aware of or not, is probably, it is "too deep to be understood or be of any use."

The next confusion, even a graver one, is that this negative sense is applied to the suttas, or more exactly, my annotated translations of the Pali suttas. The point is that many western Buddhists have communicated with me that they find the Sutta Discovery (SD) translations very useful to them. Monks, especially forest monks, in Australia, USA, Sri Lanka, Europe and Malaysia, are using these SD translations.

Both forest monks and lay Buddhists have asked my permission for their reading and recording of these translations. This is a great idea, as suttas are best heard, rather than read, and can be useful as a support for meditation practice.

However, I am not alone in noticing the difficulties that some people face when studying the suttas. Many Buddhists have attended academic courses on Buddhist Studies here in Singapore. The trend in such courses, too, is telling. A few hundred might sign up for the course, but the number will dramatically dwindle to a core

of ten or fifteen people, and on the higher levels, often there is only a couple of students.

Many people give up on such courses, I am told, because the teachers are “boring.” This of course depends on how these students define “interesting.” Suffice it here to say that many expect such courses to present Buddhism to them like “instant noodles.” They see Buddhism as packets of information to be easily stored or consumed, and then to get back to their daily business.

Academic Buddhism can easily become boring if we lack a deep interest in it, or if we lack the necessary attention span and writing skills. Many of these courses lead to a diploma, some to a degree, and even beyond. Of course those who have a love for learning would be quite happy with just that. But what happens after that?

For those centres that see such academic programmes as a part of their on-going fund-raising priorities, all this is no problem. Most expensive newspapers advertisements for the courses are sponsored. Hundreds of initial students pay a generous amount as registration and course fees. The drop-out is in fact a blessing for the lecturers who then have a smaller class. The graduates are then recruited to help run the centre and attract more funds through further academic programmes. As such, these academic programmes are actually successful.

However, I also notice another interesting thing. Many of the graduates of such academic courses are not very happy people, as they often suffer from what I call “Vimalakirti’s illness.” The graduates often speak or teach at their own centres and at other places. They become aware that the audience’s level of Dharma understanding is low and confusing, and there is much superstition and materialism (“instant noodle” Buddhism).

Some graduates, on attaining their degrees, begin to question, “What next?” It is almost the kind of feeling we get after a great

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movie. The movie ends, the lights come on, the doors open, and we are back in real life. Nothing has changed really.

The point is that “book Buddhism” in itself can neither get us a good job nor lasting happiness. The joyful interest only grows when we are touched by the life-blood of the suttas and meditation, and a spiritual friendship with inspired Buddhists. With the right key, we open the doors to the suttas. That right key is a positive attitude and great desire to learn the Dharma, best done through the suttas.

The first and last messages of the Buddha is “Take the Dharma, take yourself, as refuge” (S 6.2; D 16.2.2, also D 16.6.1). Notice “refuge” is singular, which means that Dharma and self-effort go together. The suttas are the dishes of Dharma; only after having tasted them, you will know how nourishing they are. The Buddha has given us great recipes; we only need get the right ingredients, together prepare the meal, and enjoy it in good health and happiness. Then we truly have a high degree of happiness.

13.3 Learning from Others

Singapore Buddhism is now going through an important phase in its religious history. *We are learning from various foreign Buddhists and other religions.*

Although Buddhism is a global religion, we still have communal Buddhism, such as Chinese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Myanmar Buddhism, Sinhalese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, academic Buddhism and so on, and each of these groups have their own sub-groups: for example, there is a Chief High Priest of the Siyam Nikāya here, a Chief High Priest of the Amarapura Nikāya in Malaysia; and there are different sects of Tibetan Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, etc, etc,

It is useful for us to learn how Buddhism came to these countries—China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, etc. In fact, this is what happened in all these countries. There was a phase in their Buddhist history when they all were learning from foreign Buddhists. Then *the Dharma grew on their own soil*.

For Singapore, this may well take another generation. *This Singaporeanization of Buddhism* will occur at a faster rate than the “old” Buddhist countries due to globalization and the Singapore genius (esp the ability and willingness to learn fast).

Singaporeanization of Buddhism is a natural part of our maturation as a Buddhist community. We cannot remain too long in the adolescence of being “foreign” Buddhists. Then we will be disunited into I-pods of Singaporeans becoming Thai Buddhists, Sinhalese Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, Japanese Buddhists, etc.

What is Singapore Buddhism? It simply means the presence of the True Dharma right here. It means the easy availability of experienced local teachers of the Dharma, of meditation, and of the Suttas, especially lay teachers. And there is a close networking amongst the various temples and groups, especially the youths.

Singapore Buddhists have the resources and know-how to set up its own *International Buddhist University* (IBU, which by the way means “mother” in Malay). Education is vital for educating our young Buddhists and ourselves so that we are not misguided and exploited by money monastics and false teachings.

In this way, Buddhism can focus on what it really is in the first place, that is, a teaching brings healing, peace and happiness to anyone who needs it.

At least, this is the vision of the Minding Centre. You are witness to this, and I am confident that the future will be our witness, too.

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“...There are lay disciples who are accomplished ...bearers of the Dharma, ...correctly trained and walking the path of the Dharma, who will pass on what they have gained from their own teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyze it, make it clear; until they shall be able by means of the Dharma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dharma in all its wonder.”

(Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, D 2:106)²⁹

13.4 What is Given is Not Lost

Last week (April 2009) I upgraded my computer because the old one has significantly slowed down and crashed more often. Such times are “intermediate states” for me: I lose some data but also found better ways of working (like having more space for my files, and a faster system).

In fact, what motivated me to write this reflection is the fact that I have lost my folder containing all my past reflections and notes for new ones. Fortunately, Ratna has uploaded the completed reflections onto the Dharmafarer website. This is the first example of how we do not lose what we share with others. They are always available online.

However, the numerous notes I made for future reflections are still lost. They were kept on an external hard-drive which crashed or maybe I configured it wrongly. For some strange reason, I have not put the reflections’ main file in my fixed disc, and back it up onto the external disc. Conveniently, we tend to blame such carelessness to Mara.

²⁹ Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, D 16 = SD vol 9.

There was at least once when in a serious computer breakdown I actually lost all the annotated Sutta translations I had done! Imagine, your life's work suddenly lost in a few minutes. Fortunately, we had uploaded all the completed files onto the Dharmafarer website, and burned them on CD and given them away.

So we downloaded what have uploaded, and salvaged the rest from CDs we borrowed from those we have given them. But a few new and unpublished translations were lost. Only their corrupted files remained.

But looking carefully at the forest of letters and symbols in a corrupted file, what appeared to me to be machine language, I notice a few familiar words, and then sentences. They were those I had written! In fact, I noticed there was a pattern in the corruption. So, using recurring lines of gibberish, I started to globally delete them.

More and more of the sentences I had written and the Sutta passages I have translated began to reappear, like some ancient lost message beginning to reappear before my eyes! It is hard to describe the joy that accompanied this experience.

By the time I have removed all the gibberish, I managed to get back a healthy proportion of the lost file. All I needed to do then was to fill in the missing portions. In fact, I realized in the end I have updated a new and revised edition of the Sutta translation. It was a better one than the previous one I had done.

The lesson here is: never despair in the worst of losses. Look deep into it to see what you can learn, and you will surprise yourself if you are positive and have faith in the Dharma.

My biggest worldly loss was perhaps my huge house-full of library books: it was "lost" after I resigned from monkhood. Over more than two decades I had accumulated many useful, rare, expensive and precious books, encyclopedias, Tripitaka sets, and so on. And

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also signed book gifts from famous monks and writers. Certain parties had hoped that this would stop me from writing “subversive” Buddhist exposes and critiques.

Fortunately, I had a small library which was not lost because it was always with me, as it were, that is, a bare collection of the Pali Canon and most of my personal papers. These precious few documents are still with me today, and I still use them in my work.

But the most wonderful thing I discovered is that whatever I have lost, such as the Tipitaka sets, are now easily and freely available online! And they take up very much less space. If I had all my old library, I would need to put into a whole 4-room flat in Singapore!

Through my losses, I have learned a very valuable Dharma lesson. Pain arises proportional to the attachment. Through losses we know what we really need and should value, and should let go of the rest. And the most wonderful lesson to learn is that when we freely give, the giving is never lost.

13.5 The Dharma is Still With Us

Next year I will be 60 years old or 12 cycles. If current statistics are reliable, and the playing field is level, as they say, then I have about 25 more years to go, that is, I may die around 85. But life is uncertain and is a terminal case.

During the last six years (beginning February 2002), I have completed working on 24 volumes of the Sutta Discovery (excluding off-prints). Each bound volume is about 180 pages, and appears every three months. That’s over 4300 A4 pages. This is partly due to the fact that I have been generally healthy throughout that period (and my young children wonder why!) I like to tell them that practising Buddhism is fun and cuts down stress.

Despite such blessings, the Sutta translation work is a constant uphill task. I work practically alone. It is not easy to find assistants here in such an unglamorously specialized area. The reality is that if you want to work on something as visionary as making the Buddha Word a tool for awakening in this life, you are on your own.

I constantly remind myself that just before the Buddha's awakening, even the five monks left him. He struggled on alone: if he had given up to the "rightness" of the majority, we would have no Buddha Dharma today.

So what is it that has pushed me on to work on this impossible task almost all alone? ("Almost," because my loving wife Ratna is a great help to me on her own way.) There are a couple of important reasons that motivate me to work on the Sutta translations.

An important point is that not everyone believes that the Suttas can help them, that they are *cheem* (Singlish for "too deep for me to understand"), much less that they can awaken in this life. As such, not many Buddhists bother to study the Tipiṭaka carefully. Often enough, those who publicly talk on Buddhism do not properly quote the Buddha or the Tipitaka. Very often, they are merely stating their own opinions, or quoting some successful people, or entertaining the audience.

Sometimes, they even say that the Suttas are not important. But what is Buddhism without the Suttas? What teachings are we giving? What happens when we really need help? Why are we often more worried about other religions than we are working to truly understand and experience what we believe?

The reality is that the Suttas are the best spiritual help we can find, and that we can awaken in this life.

I have been able to keep put a daily routine of Sutta work (beside running classes and taking care of my family) because *I deeply enjoy*

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doing it. It is fun translating the Suttas: it is like discovering a new Egyptian tomb or a valley of lost treasure over and over again.

As I pore over the Suttas, their words come alive and the ancient puzzle pieces begin to fit, and new angles and visions of the Dharma appear before me. I feel as I am a wide-eyed child left all alone in my father's toy and chocolate superstore! In fact, I am now convinced that you and I can awaken in this life itself (see the Okkanti Vagga, Saṃyutta ch 25).

With such good news how can I not enjoy teaching the Suttas to any who would listen?

13.6 Has the Dharma Come to Singapore?

If a foreign visitor were to come to Singapore and ask you which good Buddhist temple or centre would you recommend? And he is unable to speak Chinese.

You can say there is this Thai temple, or this Burmese Temple, or this Sinhalese temple, or this Tibetan temple, or this Japanese temple...

But there is no *Singaporean* temple that he could go to!

Indeed even a Singaporean, if he is not Chinese speaking, he will have to learn chanting the Thai style, the Burmese style, the Sinhalese style, the Tibetan style, or the Japanese style. Again no Singapore style!

In the history of all the "Buddhist" countries and even in many western countries, we have natives becoming monks or nuns, or lay people well-versed in the Dharma and running their own Buddhist centres serving local needs.

In the ancient historical records (Mahāvamsa) of Sri Lanka, the arhat Mahinda declared that the Dharma would only have arrived in Sri Lanka when a local person becomes a monk and who is awakened.

We have to consider sinking to Dharma roots in our own homes. Meantime, let us remind ourselves how we can do this by understanding the “middle way” as taught by the Buddha to Soṇa Koliṽsa in the Sona Koliṽsa Sutta (A 6.55 = SD 20.12).

13.7 Should we Modernize the Buddha’s Teaching?

Why is it that some feel that Buddhism should be taught and practised “as is” even today, while some think that we should “modernize” it? There are some clear and vital patterns in these two attitudes.

Those who feel that Buddhism should be experienced “as is” even today, generally make an effort to study the early Teachings more carefully and thoroughly, and give the Suttas a very high priority. They also have some commitment to proper meditation and mindfulness practice.

Those who think that we should “modernize” Buddhism generally give little or no priority to the early Teachings. They often quote “the Buddha” without any references, often simply making self-made statements that suit their agenda.

While the “as is” Buddhists are generally inspired by teachings and inner peaceful Dharma experiences, the “modernist” Buddhists generally are more excited by successful personalities, exuberant activities and fund-raising. These are of course not bad in themselves, and they have their place in the Buddhist mission.

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But to give them a high priority in our Buddhist lives is like a carpenter worshipping his hammer, chisel, and other tools, cleaning and polishing them, neatly displaying them, and showing them off to friends, but almost never practising or working with them!

Those who try to modernize the Buddha's Teachings are as if trying to touch up or paint over the Mona Lisa to reflect our times, or remove chunks of the Borobudur and replace them with modern structures. The Buddha Dharma is a classic, and should remain so.

If we try to change too much of a classic teaching, especially one that is wholesome and works well, then we are likely to be constantly dissatisfied with our efforts. This clearly explains why we see many monastics today trying to modernize themselves, such as becoming academic scholars, social workers, musicians, and being "engaged" with society.

The early monastics are no scholars, no social workers, no musicians, and not "engaged" with society—they are renunciants. They are good meditators, wise teachers, and compassionate spiritual friends. The good works they do are based on morally virtuous lives. They certainly do not have any bank accounts. This way they give much better spiritual help to society, instead of exploiting it.

Modernist monastics who are engaged in the world would find that they soon get tired and bored with it, simply because they lack the moral virtue and wisdom that immunize them from being troubled by worldly vicissitudes (gain and loss, fame and obscurity, happiness and sorrow, praise and blame).

This also explains why I keep meeting with monastics wherever I go: the Science Centre (and its Omni Theatre), the Sentosa Resort, the Giant shopping mall, crowded computer fairs, and many such places. I often see brown-robed monks, orange-robed monks, grey-dressed monastics, gelongs and the like, often travelling or walking with women, using their phones and video cameras.

I mention this because I think this is becoming a trend. And the reason why they do this is clear enough: they are bored with their religious life-styles. So they need some “recreation.” Someone even asked me if they could make copies of this, and hand them to the monastics they meet in such “agocara” places, where they are not supposed to be! In terms of cleaning our own home, I think this is a very good idea!

My point, echoed by a growing number of concerned Buddhists and young people, is that, to become a monastic, a true renunciant, is surely the best way to get out of suffering and work towards awakening. Furthermore, monastics should be good and morally virtuous examples for lay people, so that we are inspired to become better practitioners ourselves. We need to constantly remind the monastics about this.

True renunciant monastics are like “heart” specialists who have healed themselves to a large degree. As such, they are in a better position to heal us. But if they keep breaking the rules, and lay people encourage or accept this, then in the end, what is the difference between the monastic and the lay? (By the way, lay people who encourage monastics to break their precepts are creating very bad karma for themselves, too.)

We cannot rest smugly on the statistics that about half of Singapore are “Buddhist”—what kind of Buddhist? Are they mostly ritualistic devotees and temple followers, who do not even know who the Buddha really is, much less the Dharma? Are their lives really changed for the better?

Without the Dharma, we are mostly talking heads. Inspired by the Dharma, we speak with our hearts and touch others so that their lives truly change for the better. We need not change the Buddha Dharma, but we surely need to change ourselves.

13.8 Talking Bad About Buddhism

There are a number of books written by non-Buddhists attacking Buddhism. Decades back, the mud-slingers, mostly evangelists in a British colonial era, were poorly informed about Buddhism. Ironically, their books had just the opposite effect: westerners who were unfamiliar with Buddhism became interested in it! In fact, one of the roots of the statistical Buddhist growth we see today began humbly in this way.

Nowadays the mud-slingers have upgraded themselves: their mud is thicker and their slings more sophisticated. Some of them even take the trouble to befriend Buddhists, even feigning interest, to get inside information. Some of these mud-slingings are very well researched, and can be helpful even for the Buddhist work. For example, there is a book on different Buddhist tribes that have not been “evangelized.” Such a book would be useful to the growing number of Buddhist groups doing field work to help poor and disaster-struck Buddhist communities.

Most of the other books that attack Buddhism list such things as: many monasteries do not really know or teach authentic Buddhism; many temples centre around fund-raising and will twist Buddhism in any way to attract funds; monastics are simply having a good time at the expense of the lay Buddhists; many Buddhists are superstitious; and so on. Surprisingly, these are the very same weaknesses that concerned Buddhists are trying to highlight so that we can correct them. It is almost like these mud-slingers are doing all the leg-work for us!

Now the question arises why would these mud-slingers sacrifice their precious time to write something “bad” about Buddhism? Firstly, they feel uneasily suspect that the Buddha has taught some profound and powerful truth. Secondly, I think they feel a real sense of threat, that Buddhism is growing too fast. Thirdly, they obviously

lack faith in their own religion to think that their religion can grow by their talking bad about other religions!

But there is something more sinister here about why some evangelists try to blatantly attack other religions without thinking of its consequences. The reason clearly has to do with their idea of an all-powerful creator-god who rewards them with blessings and salvation simply out of divine grace through their faith.

Let me use a simple simile. The almighty creator-god idea is like a powerful witch-doctor, whom the whole village (or jungle, if you like) hold in fear, and resort to him in times of need and danger. Whoever comes to the witch-doctor for help, no matter how bad his or her case may be, it depends on his mood. He may or may not help you.

But if you praise him hard enough, or better, talk bad about the modern doctor in the next village (or town, if you like), then he is more likely to help you. Of course, no one dares to question whether the witch-doctor's medicine works or not. If it works, it show that you have great faith in the witch-doctor; if not, you better not mention it, because it shows you lack faith! This double bind is often effectively used in cults.

The good doctor in the town nearby is always accessible, and patients need only wait their turn. Or, in the case of an emergency, the doctor would go all the way out to treat this patient immediately. In fact, this good doctor is so compassionate that he makes great effort to teach people proper hygiene (called "moral virtue") so that the body is healthy, and how to be happy (called "meditation") so that the mind is healthy.

This way, we need not depend on him every time we fall sick. We are taught first aid (called "lovingkindness") and how to properly take our medicine (called "Dharma"). Sometimes, we do not see the

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good doctor around, but we are not worried because we know he is elsewhere teaching others how to help themselves.

The most wonderful thing about the good doctor's method is that he takes pains to transfer his wisdom and compassion to us, so that in time, we too can become good doctors if we choose to. If not, at least we know how to stay healthy and happy without the need of a crafty and temperamental witch-doctor. Furthermore, if we do not want to be good doctors ourselves, we can always work as kind nurses whenever others need help. And we don't even have to mention the good doctor's name; for, we all know who he really is.

13.9 Two Kinds of People

There are two kinds of Buddhists: those who mostly listen and those who mostly talk.

Of those who mostly talk, there are two kinds: those who talk of keeping things the way they are and those who talk of change for the better.

Of those who talk of change for the better, there are two kinds: those who talk of bettering others and those who talk of bettering themselves.

Of those who talk of bettering themselves, there are two kinds: those who only talk and those who really better themselves.

Of those who really better themselves, there are two kinds: those who better only themselves, and those who also better others.

Many see Buddhism as a ready-made "thing," as something Buddhist teachers "give" to them to "take" away. But Buddhism is not a take-away "thing." Buddhism is not a keep-sake or collector's item. Nor a single-use disposable object.

Buddhism is not yesterday's news, or tomorrow's dream: Buddhism is much more than that.

Buddhism is how we *act*, and always asking, *why* am I doing this?

Buddhism is how we *speak*, and always asking, *why* am I saying this?

Buddhism is how we *think*, and always asking, *why* am I thinking this?

In short, there are two kinds of teachers: those who ask *for* and those who ask *to*. There are those who ask you *for* things themselves. There are those who ask you *to* think for yourself.

Then there is a time to *stop* and *see* for ourselves. That is, to *stop* negative thoughts and distractions, and to *see* the inner peace within ourselves.

Now is the time for you to think of one thing that will make you *truly happy*, in a good way, deep inside. [Please spend a quiet *metta* moment now.]

Remind yourself of that vision constantly, no matter what the odds may be. Especially the odds are against you.

You are simply following what the Buddha himself has done even before he is Buddha:

He sees suffering, and does not say it is all right. (*We don't tell the suffering people, it is all right! We listen to them, we try to help them, or at least send our compassionate thoughts to them.*)

Then the Buddha is determined to find the way out of that suffering, and he does so. Every Buddha does so; every true follower of his, does so, too.

13.10 Wishing Buddhists “Happy Christmas”!

My Buddhist life began with traditional Daoist Buddhism in Melaka (Malacca, Malaysia), but it is a very colourful Peranakan version, worshipping Shakra (Tingkong), the Seven Sisters and so on. Then, as a monk, I was seriously into Theravada, but this was before Ajahns Sumedho, Brahm, Sujato and other students of Ajahn Chah began teaching. Apparently I was 20 years too early, but Ajahn Sujato quipped that he was 20 years too late: we could have been colleagues in robes.

Interestingly, both Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Brahm have karmic links with Wat Srales in Bangkok, famous for its Thai Pali scholarship. I met Ajahn Sumedho there, and became Ajahn Brahm’s translator before his ordination there. (Yes, he is ordained in Wat Srales where I was trained.) Then he left for Ajahn Chah’s forest monastery.

As a monk, in the 1990s, I had to learn Thai first before learning Pali. This was before the age of the internet, the PC and cell phone. My five years in Thailand benefits me to this day. However, as a majority of Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore are influenced by Mahayana, I decided to study Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, too.

I ran weeklong residential courses teaching the Diamond Sutra, the Heart Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, the Amitābha Sūtra, the Sixth Patriarch Sutra, the Tibetan Book of The Dead, and so on. These texts have deep philosophy and colourful imageries and stories. In due course, I realize that philosophy and stories are, at best, interesting, even entertaining—and the local crowds love to be *entertained*—so I decided to return to the Pali Suttas.

My return to the early texts is simply refreshing. It started in 2000, which was a good year. Ajahn Brahm arose Singapore Buddhist consciousness, Angie Monksfield took over the Buddhist Fellowship

(BF) which organized the Buddhist Global Conference. When, as a layman, I met Ajahn Brahm, his first words to me were that he was grateful for my being his “translator” during his Wat Srales years. Then I met Ajahn Sujato (he actually asked me to see him) whose mother, I learned, lives in Malaysia (where I came from): he has been showing warm support for my Dharma work.

I’m forever grateful for the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society (NUSBS) for their continuing interest and enthusiasm in early Buddhism, which inspired me to return to working on the Pali Suttas. And the BF for giving me personal space to do what I enjoy most: teach these Suttas I have worked on for the benefit of others and as my own spiritual cultivation.

In 2009, I met an amazing Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and lay leader who was a keen and intelligent student in my Sutta classes and courses. As a Vajrayana practitioner, he says that he should not forget the true Buddhist roots, which is early Buddhism. (Another Tibetan lay leader I met, however, did not impress me: he went around shaking peoples’ hands like campaigning for an election, but refused or was unable to return the *añjalī* commonly used by Buddhists!)

As many local Buddhists are still strongly influenced by Christianity, to the extent of even wishing Buddhists “merry Christmas,” in December 2009, I wrote this reminder for local Buddhists to greet only our Christian friends “Merry Christmas,” but *not* your Buddhist colleagues.

The rationale for this is simple: we do not need to be culturally conditioned by an outside religion when we say that we are following the Buddha’s teaching. I have yet to meet Christians who wish one another Happy Vesak in May! Political correctness aside: we have to heal ourselves of the subtle conditionings of the Pinkerton Syndrome, and learn more about our true selves so that we will be

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truly liberated.

In the Sundarika Bhāradvāja Sutta³⁰ we will see how the Buddha gently guides a very religious brahmin to the true meaning of prayer, sacrifice and spiritual liberation. Therein, the Buddha also speaks of the true “baptism” (*nahata*), which is an ancient belief and practice in India.

13.11 The Great Commission

To the Firefly Mission, Singapore

23rd Oct 2008

Dear Fireflies of the Dharma,

The Great Commission

We are all Dharma missionaries in some way. All my life as a monk, and now as a full time lay missionary, I have been inspired by the Buddha’s “Great Commission” given in the Vinaya (V 1:21), where he instructs the first 60 monks (which also refers to us now) to “go forth” for the good of the many.

“Go forth” has many levels of meaning and commitment.

The best of those “gone forth” are of course the true monastics who are studying, practising, and realizing the Dharma in some way, and teaching it. We benefit greatly from the teachings and presence of such practitioners who have gone forth.

Going Forth (First Method)

The second level of “going forth” are those who try their best to

³⁰ Sundarika Bharadvaja Sutta, Sn 3.4 = SD 22.2.

have some Dharma grounding, and then go way out to help the poor, needy, ignorant and those in fear. I know many of you are working in distant places, in the dangerous borderlands, where the rebels and army are more friendly to you than the “evangelists” who are trying to continue to colonize the lives of our fellow Asians, and to make them forsake their rich ancient culture.

Sometimes, we are even threatened that we are “invading” their territory (familiar colonial language). Please be strong and remember that we are simply working with our fellow brothers and sisters in our global Buddhist family.

Going Forth (Second Method)

Then we need to “go forth” from our perceived negative emotions, uncertainties and inabilities. Working in a group, especially as a mission, put us into a special challenging situation where Mara will test us in every way. Sometimes we see the weaknesses, even mistakes, of others. This is not the occasion for blame, but a time to forgive, to help compassionately.

For we all have our ignorance and mistakes in turn. It is great environment to grow in, when we know it is all right to make mistakes, as there will be those who will give us a kind hand, healing word, and the right directions.

You Are Not Alone

One of the great benefits from working with the FFM is that we feel that we are never alone. You may not appreciate this until you try doing full time translating of the Suttas: I have to work alone. Even my wife, Ratna, is not always able to help me, such as when she has pressing family duties.

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Sometimes I have Sutta and Dharma questions that even the monastics I approach are unsure how to answer. But somehow the answers would come of themselves, as it were, from the Suttas themselves and from my meditations. So I am not really alone, since this Dharma work is very joyful in itself.

Each of us has a special blessing. For me, one of the greatest blessings is that there are those who humbly and uninvited go about preparing meals for us, cleaning up after that, arranging the furniture, driving us around, welcoming us at gatherings, listening to us with attentive ears, and rejoicing in our work. This is the gift of hospitality, time and effort.

There are so many ways of working for the Dharma. We will know our blessings when the challenges come.

Do not say I cannot do it: rather ask, how best can I do this for the Dharma. For, every time we go forth, someone's life out there becomes a bit better.

Let us go forth more often and farther afield. Fill the world with Fireflies. For, even a tiny light can guide us in the dark.

14 TRUE PURPOSE OF RENUNCIATION

14.1 The Laity and Monastics

Purpose of monkhood is to attain awakening now

The purpose of monks and nuns is to become arhats in this life itself, or at least attain some level of awakening. This is clear from numerous suttas in the early Buddhist scripture. In fact, the early

suttas are records of how men and women meeting the Dharma and becoming arhats and saints. Over the centuries, as Buddhism spread beyond India, the Buddha Word was pushed aside, diluted, and priority was given to local beliefs and rituals. The idea of monkhood was also radically changed because of various difficult social conditions (as my new book, *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b, shows).

We need to be informed of the true nature and purpose of renunciation, so that we do not become a party to Dharma decline, not to say generating very bad karma for ourselves. The Commentary to the Mahā Suññata Sutta (M 3:118) says that for a religious teacher or student outside the Teaching (a non-Buddhist) to fall from his training, only falls away from a mundane training—like one falling from a donkey and is only covered in dust. However, for one who violates the holy life training in the Teaching (with its path, fruit and nirvana), that is, consciously violates the precepts, it is a great loss, like one falling from an elephant, incurring great suffering. (MA 4:165).

The robe is just a piece of cloth that can be easily soiled, and only the wearer can truly by his pure mind keep it clean all the time.

Monastics should be properly trained

As lay Buddhists, we must ensure that we in no way contribute to the worldliness of a monastic (that is, a monk or a nun), by distracting them from their spiritual training or duties in any way. We must never lose sight of the true purpose of Buddhist monasticism, that is, as the Buddha originally intends it to be.

The Vinaya is unequivocal about the importance of monastic training. The Vinaya records the Buddha as stating, “I allow, bhikshus, an experienced and competent monk to live **five years in dependence (*nissaya*)** (on a preceptor or teacher, V 1:45 f, 60 f), but an inexperienced one **all his life**” (V 1:80). In other words, a

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capable person (such as one being well schooled, knowing the Dharma, elderly, etc) must still spend at least five years under the spiritual tutelage of a qualified preceptor or teacher, so that the “new monk” (*navaka bhikkhu*) truly imbibes the life of a monastic and leaves behind his old worldly ways.

Only after at least 5 years of Vinaya, Dharma and meditation training, the competent monk or nun should then seek permission from his preceptor or teacher for leave to go out and teach Dharma.

When we read through the early Vinaya, we often see lay people complaining about monastics’ behaviour, and then the Buddha makes the rules. In other words, the laity has a central role in the making of the Vinaya rules, and also in reminding the monastics to be good practitioners, worthy of their almsfood. Buddhaghosa in his Commentaries speaks of monastics living on alms and donations, as follows:

an immoral monk who lives on society’s alms is like a thief;
a good monk who is unreflective of using requisites
is like a debtor;
a saint of the path (short of a full-fledged arhat)
is like an heir;
an arhat (who is self-awakened and liberated)
is like an owner. (MA 5:32; SA 2:199)

Social work and management are best left to the laity

Social work or management training, although “useful,” are best avoided by monastics, and left in the capable hands of the laity. Social work might become a convenient excuse for monastics to handle money. In the Maṇi,cūḷaka Sutta, the Buddha declares:

“For those who open themselves to the use of money (gold and silver), also open themselves to sensual plea-

sure. Such people are surely neither holy men nor sons of the Sakya (monks).” (S 4:326, paraphrased)

Those monastics who choose to turn away from the Buddha may even fall into crimes, reports of which are becoming more common in our newspapers today.

The Buddhist monastic system and meditation teachings as taught by the Buddha work very well. They are like original prescription of a good medicine, to be taken as prescribed. If we adulterate the medicine, or do not take it at all, how can our sickness be cured? Or worse, if we fiddle with the medicine labels, or sell the medicine on the black market for personal benefit, what will happen to our health in the end? Before we even talk about reforming Buddhism, we must have a deep understanding and experience of the Dharma.

We should be less of Buddhist *inventors*, and more of being Buddhist discoverers. This is because Buddhism is **the direct understanding of true reality**. We may invent new ways of chanting, or meditation, but we cannot “invent” true reality: we can only discover it. Furthermore, the Buddha has given us an easy plan for the self-awakening of both the laity and the monastic in this life itself: see Chapter 25 of the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

14.2 False “False Monastics” & True “False Monastics”

We read in the papers (Straits Times, 2007) of “false monks and nuns” masquerading in robes to collect donation from unsuspecting and soft-hearted people. Since they are not monastics in the first place, they are actually the false “false monks and nuns.”

In fact, they are inspired by the examples of the real “false monks and nuns” who have all the things that lay people have and enjoy,

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and much more. Have you ever met a “poor” monk today (except for the forest monks, perhaps)?

The money monastics of today live in comfortable palatial mansions called “temples,” complete with all the comforts of a modern home, move around in their own cars, have large bank accounts, own property, and enjoy sense-pleasures, which even the average layperson does not.

Today, we almost never see the alms-bowl of such monastics. While the laity on precept days and retreats observe the rule of not eating outside the proper time, many monastics eat whenever they like. The point is that even their good karma soon runs out.

The moneytheistic monastics say they need money to be “independent”: independent of what? The Buddha and the early monastics were independent—without any money.

The moneytheistic monastics say that they need money so that they can do “good works.” What about keeping the monastic precepts of the Buddha?

It is the monastic rules that make a monastic. What is football without football rules? What is a country without laws?

The Buddha, as the Suttas tell us, often sits on a pile of grass to meditate, and lives a simple life of abstinence and wisdom, teaching others compassionately to overcome suffering.

What are the benefits of living a simple life, even as a lay person? In fact, we can say that it is easy even today to awaken to spiritual liberation as a lay person by trying our best to keep to the five precepts.

Let us remind ourselves of the Buddha's simple lifestyle and teachings. This will inspire us to work towards self-awakening in this life itself (even for a lay person). Those who tarry may not get the chance to be reborn as a human being at all.

Not being awakened is like being stricken with a chronic serious illness and not knowing it. Let us start taking the Dharma medicine *now*, and be the growing number of practitioners who *know* they will attain awakening in this life itself.

14.3 All the World's a Stage

A last-minute PODZ Group Pre-mentoring session (GPMS) had me cancel my attending the UN Day of Vesak (UNDV) in Bangkok in early May 2009, hosted by my alma mater, the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University. Two good friends of mine, Angie Monksfield (outspoken president of the Buddhist Fellowship) and John Whalen-Bridge (socially-engaged literature professor at the National University of Singapore) presented papers at the UNDV conference.

Angie spoke with characteristic conviction why monastics should be exemplary models for everyone. She highlighted the huge embarrassment to Buddhists in Singapore when a prominent local monk, earning a sizeable monthly salary for running a charity, has been charged with a number of cases of financial dishonesty. With poetic justice, as it were, the monk in question was present in the audience, too! How many of us could have spoken into the horse's mouth on the world stage? ³¹

John spoke on the skillful means of Buddhist monastics staging open protests against oppression and injustice towards their religion and country.³²

³¹ Angie Monksfield's "Buddhist Approach to Economic Crises": http://www.icundv.com/seminar_detail.php?smt_id=48

³² John Whalen-Bridge's "'Angry Monk Syndrome' on the World Stage" : http://www.icundv.com/seminar_detail.php?smt_id=61

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Both papers were given approving nods by the more open-minded, but rebuked by the more politically correct. I will spend the rest of this reflection responding to John's essay because he has asked me to, and partly because I feel his paper is insightful.

Why, John asks, do Buddhist monks who are supposed to have achieved some level of "permanent peacefulness" or disciplined enough to suppress anger or feel shame, could show their anger publicly? Monks in Tibet, Myanmar and Korea, for example, have been involved in conflicts "fueled by colonial resentment and geopolitical maneuvering."

The first reason is found in just what has been said: Since Buddhist monks "conveniently signify the human capacity for self-pacification, that becomes, in the breach, highly dramatic first-page copy." When a monk awakens to nirvana, it is not news; when they are involved in politics, it is news, simply because they are not supposed to do so.

Monk, in other words, can be successful "performers," too. This is especially true so long as their expression of anger seems "reasonable" and they do not turn into violence in a way that make victims of others.

The "Angry Monk Syndrome," says John, has beneficial results for protesting monks for two reasons: (1) a sympathetic viewer will not blame the monks but rather the oppressing state (2) The mass media is not Buddhist to a significant degree, and so need not be overly concerned that Buddhist monks are betraying Buddhist principles. The important thing is that the monks are perceived as harmless, which reinforces their victimhood.

John recalls an almost amusing incident when, as one of the pro-choice activists battling against pro-life Christian fundamentalists in Los Angeles in the late 1980s. The pro-choicers would try to be at the clinic that the pro-lifers intended to close down to peacefully

stop them. However, if on that day the media refused to show up, both parties would call off their confrontation. It takes three to tango. The battle is symbolic of our beliefs and vision, and the world is our stage.

My question now is: what if the theatrics do not work? Answer: We have occasions when the Buddhist action is non-theatrically real and painful. A classic case here is that of Vietnam of the early 1960s. The excessively partisan Catholic and anti-Buddhist Ngo Dinh Diem government persecuted the Buddhists.

The Vatican flag was regularly flown at all major public events in South Vietnam, and Diem had dedicated the predominantly Buddhist country to the Virgin Mary in 1959. In 1963, the Buddhists were not even allowed to fly the Buddhist flag on Vesak Day. When a group of unarmed Buddhists protested in Hue, the army and police fired guns and launched grenades into the crowd, resulting in deaths.

When all Buddhist efforts failed to end the government's persecutions, the monk Thich Quang Duc,³³ peacefully burnt himself in public. This was followed by more self-immolations. (The "First Lady," Ngo Dinh Nhu, said that she would "clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show.") All this finally led to the Diem government's downfall that same year.

This is a powerful lesson for us. When we are persecuted by others, let us remember Thich Quang Duc; and before we go on persecute others, let us remember Thich Quang Duc, too. The burning can start on either side, even from the most pacific, when pushed to the edge.

³³ Thich Quang Duc: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thích_Quảng_Đức

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14.4 Money and Monastics

Recent news about monks and money is troubling to say the least. Those who are more for the world, say it is all right to change the rules (although often we are not sure what the consequences are). Those who know the Dharma and Vinaya are not heard clearly enough.

If you are not sure, ask yourself: “Would the Buddha, or Ānanda, be doing this sort of thing?”

The doing of one kind of good (eg social work) does not cancel out other unwholesome acts done habitually. According to the (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇī Sutta (A 10.177 = SD 2.6a), those who are generous, but do not keep the precepts, will be reborn as elephants, horses, cows, or chickens (that is, as well loved pets, but still as animals!)

The Buddhist teachings are very clear on monastics and money, as expressed by a practitioner of our times:

“Obviously, the Buddha thought that the rule prohibiting the acceptance of gold or money was, indeed, a very important rule. The non-acceptance of money has always been one of the fundamental observances of those who have left the world.

Money is the measure of wealth and to most people material wealth is the goal of life. In the renunciation of money by monks and nuns, they emphatically demonstrate their complete rejection of worldly pursuits.

At one stroke they set themselves significantly apart from the vast majority of people and thus become a constant reminder to all that a life based on the struggle to accumulate money is not the only way to live.

Through giving up money they give up much of their power to manipulate the world and to satisfy their desire.”

(Brahmavamso, 1996; emphases added)

The Buddha says in the Maṇi,cūḷaka Sutta:

For whomever gold and silver are allowable, for him the five cords of sense-pleasure are allowable, too. For whomever the five cords of sense-pleasure are allowable, you can for sure consider him as one who neither has the quality of a recluse nor is he a son of the Sakya.

(S 42.10.8/4:326)

Please Join Me In This Aspiration:

My main purpose of life now is to prepare a Buddhist legacy of well-translated Suttas, a simple but effective meditation practice, and as good a personal example as possible for our young Buddhists today so that they (we) will have a bright Dharma future.

By this truth may the Dharma prosper against all odds.

By this truth, may those who have renounced the world grow in moral strength and wisdom to be inspiring examples of the Buddha's Sakya Sons and Daughters.

Together, we can make a better Dharma future possible; for, we will return to where we left off.

14.5 Phra Khru Ba Neua Chai, a True “Social worker”

Phra Khru³⁴ Ba Neua Chai is a formidable monk who is a true “social worker” as far as a “socially-engaged” monk goes. He heads the Golden Horse Monastery, in the drug-infested Thai-Myanmar border, where he teaches abandoned children in muay-thai (Thai boxing) for the last 17 years. He is a horse-riding monk and he tells the local folks not to plant poppies but switch to vegetables. The drug lords are not happy with him and tried to kill him a few times, but the monk is determined and brave.

Most importantly despite his bending the rules, he does not break them. He does not have money and does not have sex.

I had earlier seen a TV documentary of the Phra Khru. Then I read 5th Sunday Times (27 Jan 2009) feature on him and it brings back many happy memories of my monk life in Thailand, where I had a very good idea how Buddhism can really change lives on a national scale. Where rules can be bent, but not broken.

When are the rules broken? When “social work” becomes a high-class life-style with a lot of money and glamour involved, and may be sex what not.

The (Saddha) Jāṇussoṇī (A 10.177 = SD 2.6a) tells us that if we do a lot of good deed (such as giving and social work) but do not keep the precepts, we will enjoy the benefits of the good karma, but we will be reborn in subhuman planes, such as the animal world: as an elephant, horse, chicken or cow, but we will be very well loved and taken care of. No wonder, we see many animals in the temples and monasteries!

³⁴ “Phra Khru” is the lowest of the Thai ecclesiastical titles, just below that of a Chao Khun,

But isn't it better to be reborn in higher planes so that we can practise the Dharma and be free from suffering? So, let us be generous, do social work, etc, but also keep the precepts properly.

15 INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

15.1 Minum kopi-lah!

Last week, someone sent me an email about Christian evangelist Paul Hattaway's "Peoples of the Buddhist World: A Christian Prayer Guide" (2004). That same week, another email told me that a Buddhist's dying relative is literally being crowded by a vulture-herd of evangelists to convert the helpless captive patient.

I remember reading Ajahn Brahm's book, "Simply This Moment" (2007:148)³⁵ where mentions such incidents in Singapore and Malaysia as being "really too much." More specifically, he reminds Buddhists "to stand up for themselves."

On a happy note, someone online replied to Hattaway's "planning for the demise of Buddhism" by simply stating "No thanks! I'll stick with Buddhism!" Please read Allen Carr's inspiring review.³⁶

To be frank, I'm a serious Buddhist today doing full-time lay ministry and translating the early Buddhist scripture because I have had really bad experiences with evangelists since my childhood. My elder brother was converted very young, and my terrified sister had to hide in the wash-room when they came to the house.

My brother became an elder in a Gospel Chapel. Now my 74-year old brother spends much of his time sitting in a corner and chatting

³⁵ For a free download of Ajahn Brahm's article and book, go to:
<http://www.bswa.org/modules/mydownloads/singlefile.php?cid=19&lid=562>.

³⁶ <http://politics.sgforums.com/forums/1728/topics/322840?page=1>

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with invisible Japanese girls! He has dementia. If only he had grown up with Buddhist mindfulness training.

Having lost much of their following in the West, churches are now beginning to look for opportunities elsewhere. Of course the Islamic world is out of the question. Even the most optimistic evangelist knows that the chance of spreading the Gospel amongst Muslims is nil. The obvious targets are Africa, India and the Buddhist countries of Asia.

(Allen Carr in his review)

The constant harassment and religious bullying of the evangelists is actually good for Buddhism in a way. It keeps us on our toes and not to take things for granted. Throughout history, religions have learned from each other like children being immunized from viruses.

I also know many Buddhists who are admirably patient with evangelists. One of my fondest memories is that of a brother monk in Malaysia, a young Thai, who was once approached by an evangelist in his own temple in KL. He invited the sin-peddler to sit down and smilingly listened to him right to the end.

After about half an hour of self-righteous lecturing, the preacher finally asked the monk: “Do you repent now?” The friendly monk noticing that the evangelist had paused long enough smiled and quietly said:

“Minum kopi-lah!” (In Malay, means: “Drink the coffee please!”)

The Thai monk could not speak a word of English!

Let us be constantly fervent in our lovingkindness to the evangelists: they have such wonderful energy and purposefulness, although badly misguided and unfeeling for others. With our constant lovingkindness (*mettā*) to them, they will begin to know that Buddhists can and know how to be happy without any idea of “sin.”

This humorous yet beautiful anecdote reminds us of man's inner goodness:

Native: Would I go to hell if I have never heard of God or Christianity before?

Evangelist: No.

Native: In that case, please do not tell me anything about them!

Please say *no* to the evangelists!

Do say *yes* to your inner goodness, to the Dharma.

15.2 How the Bible Made Me a Better Buddhist

As Singapore becomes more English-speaking and global (TMC has a growing number of overseas students), we also see a growing presence of Christianity and religious mobility (see Straits Times, 9 Aug 2008), we (as Buddhists) must come to terms with such a challenge.

My religious life (as a seeker) began with the Bible: I loved reading, and my brother was an elder in his own church. That was in the early 1960s. I even had a certificate from an Australian Bible school for successfully completing a study of the four Gospels and a few books of the Old Testament.

Two things I learned from my Bible studies: they (many different Bibles) often use beautiful English and they write with such conviction. You will see how I try to write in beautiful English and with conviction in what I believe today.

One thing troubled me though. Near the end of my course, I asked my tutor how I should treat my non-Christian friends: a saintly Hindu octogenarian, a Bahai classmate, Muslim friends, and many Chinese friends who were Daoists and followers of various other

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religions. In one short paragraph, he said that they are all Satan-worshippers, and that I best avoided them!

I was shocked, to say the least! He had not even met any of my friends. Moreover, I have not come across anywhere in the Bible where it says we should hate our friends.

I can say that I have at least one good Christian friend, that is, my brother. He respected my religion and loved me even when I was a monk. Once he quoted the Bible to me, "Let not a brother be a stumbling block to another brother."

Another helpful piece of advice he gave me was to work for what I really believed in. He told me to set up a kind of trust or even a small company, if I wanted to avoid human weaknesses, such as quarrels and lack of commitment. This is one of the ideas that inspired the Minding Centre.

If more Buddhists were like him, we would be more successful in working for Buddhism.

When I was a monk, my eldest nephew once visited me on a Sunday. Then the puja bell rang. I told him that I have to go for puja, and suggested that he went for his prayers in the church next door. He replied that he could not do that! "Why," I asked. He said, "They are of a different confession." My sad reply: "Now you know why I am not a Christian: if I joined any *one* church, I will have to denounce over 6000 *other* churches!" I can have more friends without being a Christian.

Please don't get me wrong: Christianity, like Buddhism and the other world religions, have great teachings. But people are messing all of them up. I loved studying religion, living ones, dead ones, new ones. But only Buddhism encourages me to think for myself and that the answer lies within me.

A saying from Amos still inspires me: “Walk humbly with your God.” As a young monk, I put in every effort to study all the Buddhist religions: Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Zen, Nichiren, Western Buddhism, etc. After some 20 years, I still find that the Buddha’s Buddhism is still the best. Still I have a lot to learn from other religions, Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

In a famous beautiful verse from the first Corinthians, Paul writes, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.” Then I discovered that the Buddha too (2 millennia before) speaks in a similar tone. But how do I learn to love and show it? I only really learned this when I became a monk and learned lovingkindness meditation, and I discovered a greater love than even charity.

For, to give with love and wisdom is the best giving. To *love* is to give a hand to someone when he needs it; to give *wisdom* is to teach him how to help himself and give a hand to others, too.

A couple of Bible verses puzzle me, though. One is where John the apostle says, “No greater love has a man than this, that he lays down his life for another.” I discovered later that the Buddha had said the very same thing 2600 years ago (see Sigalovada Sutta³⁷). Then I thought, if the Buddha had died for us, the world today would have had no way out of suffering! Thank you, Buddha, for *living* for us. Buddhaghosa, too, said in his Visuddhi, magga that it is better not to die, but to live for those you love!

Both Matthew and Luke said something like “Do not resist evil. If someone smites you on one cheek, give him the other. If someone takes your cloak, let him take your shirt, too.” The Saṃyutta tells an interesting story about how the Buddha did something just like that

³⁷ Sigalovada Sutta, D 31=SD 4.1.

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(S 10.12)! There is also a Chan story where a poor monk sheltered a thief who then stole his bowl. But, he got up and ran after the thief: “Here, take my robe, too!”

Often in a bus or train or in public, I meet an evangelist who slaps me on my left cheek, and I used to give him my right, too. But it got worse, he kept on slapping me. Finally, I told them in a bus on Bukit Timah Road: “Please stop slapping me on my cheeks. You don’t know anything about cheek-slapping. Please find out more about it from the Bible.”

It’s not that I love the Bible less, but I love the Buddha more. If you are a true believer of your religion, and you find people do not really practise what they preach, you will surely find solace in the Buddha. For, he tells you that *you are not alone*.

All by himself the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree
All the five monks left him, but he struggled on
His greatest moment came when he was all alone
The wisest being of all arose in that stillness.
Share with me this great reflection:

“When I face my life’s great struggles, I may be all alone,
But so did the Buddha in his greatest moment.”

15.3 Please leave God alone!

This week the signs are very clear. Let me list three dramatic ones: a women’s group, a jailed sectarian assassin and a TV crime story. They all evoked the same message: religion can be bad for health, both mental and physical health, that is. To be fair, I need to be more specific: the God-idea can make people do the worst things.

AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) is a leading secular women’s organization in Singapore. At its 28 March annual

general meeting, 6 new members of its 11 executive council came from the same church, and have the same “feminist mentor.” They had successfully ousted the “old guards” and were, amongst other things, all against lesbianism and homosexuality.

The Straits Times of 29 April reported that an Islamist terrorist from Singapore has been sentenced to 18 years’ jail in Jakarta for killing a Christian school-teacher in Palembang, the attempted murder of a few others, and planning terrorist attacks against Westerners in Indonesia. He showed no remorse and refused to appeal, saying, “We don’t believe in the judicial system, and we don’t recognize it” because it is not in accordance with his beliefs.

This week’s episode of “Criminal Minds” (the third of season 4, “Minimal Loss”) is about a sequestered Christian cult in the US whose leader, “a prophet” practised “inappropriate behaviour” with minors. FBI agents Reid and Prentiss, and another officer investigating a report of child molestation were held captive by the cult. After a dramatic Waco siege-like standoff (including shootouts between heavily armed cult members and the police), the followers, mostly women and children managed to escape. That is, they barely escaped the cult leader’s bombing their stronghold.

The common terrifying thread running through these three accounts is the same: they all believed that their faith is above everything else, that their God is the one and only true one. Unbelievers or those outside the “tribe” were expelled or killed without compunction, indeed, with a sense of religious fulfillment. As we well know, this is only the tip of the iceberg, as we know much of the religious history of God-religions is written in blood and tears of non-believers.

The lesson from these three accounts (and many other like them) is clear: we are each a religion unto ourselves. The self and the group (the tribe) form the most dangerous religion, deluded by the duality

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of self and other, that if you are not with us, you are against us. And when this is nuclear-powered by a God-idea, the situation reaches critical mass.

I do not think any of us human are ever qualified to speak for God. Let us neither speak for God, nor God for us. The point is God has never ever spoken for himself. We only hear of God in stories and parables. If God is in Heaven, it is best to leave him there, and not drag him into our petty humanity or lack of it. We should understand the parables and stories for what they are: we should not mistake the finger for the moon.

God-centred religions easily start and fuel sectarian violence, male chauvinism (God is male, after all) and sociopathy, just as self-centred faiths do. The main reason for this is clear: God has been externalized, separated from us. In such strife and violence, we can never find time to bow to God, and bow low enough to see God.

But there is a much better way to see God, that is, in the stillness of our hearts. The recollection of God's goodness should bring joy, peace and unconditional love in our hearts. And in that openness, we find true wisdom. With that joy and wisdom, we are rightly ready to help ourselves and to others help themselves.

We should help others not out of a religious duty, nor out of moral superiority, nor for propaganda, nor for martyrdom. For then, we are doing it only for ourselves, a most selfish act; for we are really using others for our own glory.

Let me end with a parable. We extend a hand to others because we have two. One to hold on to safety and the other to pull out another out of trouble. And we have two arms with which to embrace one another warmly in unconditional acceptance.

15.4 Forewarned, Forearmed (For Some)

Religion as evident from personal experience and news reports is the most destructive of human force. Indeed, next to hurricanes and widespread natural disaster, God-religions (and sometimes Buddhism, too) are the most destructive forces on earth. The atomic bombs have exploded, but the religious bombs keep exploding and taking countless numerous lives.

What little we can do now will surely help change the future for greater sanity, peace and wisdom.

In today's Straits Times (6 Jan 2007: S17) there is a must-read, entitled "10 myths, truths about atheism" by Sam Harris, the prize writer of two important books: "The End of Faith" (2004) and "Letter to a Christian Nation" (2006). This very important and education write-up was originally published in the LA Times.³⁸

For links to Harris' two books,³⁹ and related entry in the Wikipedia on them⁴⁰ see footnotes. I have also found Harris' paper on modern Islam⁴¹.

³⁸ By Sam Harris, Los Angeles Times, 24 Dec, 2006. Repr in The Straits Times, 6 Jan 2007: S17. <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-harris24dec24,0,3994298.story?coll=la.opinion-rightrail>

³⁹ Sam Harris on his book "The End of Faith" (2004), interviewed by Kenneth Krause: http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/kenneth_krause/-end-of-faith.html; Sam Harris on "Letter to a Christian Nation" (2006) interviewed by Random House: <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/-display.pperl?isbn=9780307265777&view=auqa>

⁴⁰ "The End of Faith" (Wikipedia): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_End_of_Faith

⁴¹ Sam Harris on the Reality of Islam: http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/20060207_reality_islam/

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Most importantly, do read his write up on the Buddha;⁴² yes, he is a Buddhist,” perhaps even more so than most of us.

Please pass this on to others so that their minds become more open, too.

May we all find peace within and may we let it out, too.

Pace in terram! Sabbe sattā santī hontu!

15.5 Buddha and “Allah”

The Straits Times (Fri 28/12/07, p26) carries an interesting article by Farish A Noor entitled “The origins of the word ‘Allah’.” He writes that the word Allah is pre-Islamic (like “Brahma” in the Buddha’s time), and is even today used for “God” by all Arabic speaking communities, whether Catholics, Copts, or Muslim. It is only in Malaysia that the word is proscribed, that is, “only Muslim can use the word ‘Allah’ for God.”

Page 17 of the same paper carries the report, “Churches turn to courts over use of ‘Allah’.” The Sabah Evangelical Church has sued the government for banning the import of Christian books containing the word “Allah.”

I will briefly try to explain here why I think this ban occurs only in Malaysia, even though the word “Allah” simply translates “God.” (That is, I will not comment on the historical reason given by Farish.) Although I agree with Farish that there should be no ban on religious words. I strongly think that the Christian leaders and evangelists are themselves at fault.

⁴² “Killing the Buddha” by Sam Harris (Shambhala Sun, March 2006):
<http://www.samharris.org/media/killing-the-buddha.pdf>

Non-Muslim Malaysians have been harrassed by evangelists ever since Portuguese times. Not only do people feel belittled by the evangelists, but many families are broken up as a result of such evangelism. In fact, the evangelism is so aggressive that the unthinking public often enough unconsciously become victims of the Stockholm Syndrome, when they actually begin to sympathize with these evangelists.

Occasionally, the Christians even try to convert the Muslims. Understandably, the Muslim administrators of Malaysia are making efforts to make sure that the Christians do not have the tools of conversion—namely, religious terminology—which make it easier for the Muslims to become Christians.

A similar situation occurred in China recently, when the Chinese government makes a law that all Tibetan “incarnations” need to be licensed by the state⁴³. This is a brilliant political counter-move on the Tibetan notion of tulku or incarnation (politicized rebirth), which started around the 12th century.⁴⁴

Group karma seems to be at work here. As to further significance, I leave the wise reader to reflect on, especially with regards to the purpose of Dharma as intended by the Buddha.

A broad hint of how we can truly benefit from the Dharma can be found in *Samaṇa-m-cala Sutta* 1 (A4.87)⁴⁵.

⁴³ See: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article2194682.ece>.

⁴⁴ See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulku>

⁴⁵ *Samaṇa-m-acala Sutta* 1 on four types of noble saints in terms of meditation attainment (A 4.87 = SD 20.13).

15.6 The Buddha Reaches Out to All

The Buddha is a master communicator. One very effective method he uses is to use words and terms already current in his times.

Mostly of these terminologies are those of the brahmins, the powerful class of his time. Here are a few examples:

- (1) The brahmins claim that they, and only they, have the Word (the Vedas), and the Path to God (Brahmā).

The Buddha replies that “God” is not out there, but within ourselves. Through the practice of lovingkindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity we cultivate the four faces of Brahma, without rituals or prayers.

- (2) The brahmins claims that they baptize (*nahataka*) or wash themselves clean of their sins in holy rivers (like John the Baptist), and they can purify others of their sins.

The Buddha replies that in his teaching, his disciples baptize themselves in the waters of stillness, and come up dry!

- (3) The brahmins define that “karma” as religious ritual we should regularly perform, or rather get the brahmins to perform for us so that our ancestors go to heaven, and we deserved our place (class) in society.

The Buddha proclaims that “karma” is the intention and purity of our actions, not rituals or prayers. Each of us is personally accountable for our actions.

In the Tevijja Sutta (D 13 = SD 1.8), the Buddha gives further examples on how he deals with the religious problems of his days (or today), especially with the God idea.

16 LIVING BEINGS

16.1 Animals Go to Heaven

The Buddha teaching is unique amongst the world religions: it is not only for humans and gods; it is also for animals. There are numerous stories that relate how animals that associate with good humans or are well treated, go to heaven after they die.

The first example is that of the Bodhisattva's **horse** Kanṭhaka. The Introduction to the Jātaka Commentary (which is one of the earliest records we have of the Buddha's early life) tells us how when the Bodhisattva Siddhattha renounces the world, his horse Kanṭhaka is so deeply saddened that he dies broken-hearted, but obviously with a wholesome last thought-moment. He is reborn as the deva Kanṭhaka in the heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (Sakra's heaven).

The next famous animal story is found in the story of the Buddha's solitary retreat in the Pārileyya. The Vinaya (V 1:337-357) records how in the 10th year of the ministry, when a dispute arises amongst the monks of Kosambī who even tell the Buddha off when he tries to counsel them.

After trying hard to reconcile them and failing, he quietly leaves for a solitary retreat in the Parileyya forest where he is attended by a like-minded **elephant** (he leaves his own tribe for the joy of solitude). Watching how the Buddha prepares warm water every morning the elephant Parileyyaka himself prepares it for the Buddha. He also offers the Buddha wild fruits and takes care of his robe and bowl.

A **monkey**, watching the elephant, offers the Buddha a honeycomb. Later, however, in his excitement, the monkey falls on a sharp stump, immediately dies and is reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. So too the elephant, who becomes the deva Parileyya-

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ka. The full story is found in the Dhammapada Commentary (see “Buddhist Legends,” book 1 story 5).

Then there is the well known story of the **frog** deva in the Vimāna Vatthu (Vv 852-88). It is said that once a frog sits listening to the Buddha teaching. Although not knowing human language, it is captivated by the Buddha’s soothing voice. As he listens entranced, a farmer, leaning on his pole, immediately pierces him to death. The frog is reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-three as Maṇḍuka Deva (the frog deity). He appears before the Buddha in all his glory to sing his praises. (The full story is given in the Vimāna Vatthu Commentary: see “The Minor Anthologies” vol 4 pages 102 f.)

One of the longest stories in world literature, the Udena cycle, is found in the Dhammapada Commentary (book 2 story 1). It is actually a cycle of nested stories spanning many lives leading to the Buddha’s time. In one of the stories, during a plague, a poor luckless wandering man named Kotuhalaka reaches a herdsman house and is given some food. The herdsman feeds his **dog** with the same food. Kotuhalaka looks with envy at the dog. That night, Kotuhalaka dies from over-eating, and his thinking about the dog leads him to be reborn as the bitch’s puppy.

Now, a pratyeka Buddha (a solitary fully self-awakened Buddha who does not establish his teaching) regularly comes to the house for alms, and the dog (Kotuhalaka) takes a liking to him. When the pratyeka-buddha finally leaves, the dog is saddened and dies. The commentators remark that dogs, unlike humans, are straight-forward and lack deceit. So upon dying, he is reborn in the heaven of the Thirty-three as a deva (god).

One of the most famous animal stories is that of the Abhidhamma bats. The Dhammapada story (book 14 story 2) tells us in an interesting aside, that 500 youths, witnessing the Buddha perform the twin wonder (a miracle of fire and water radiating from his body),

decide to go forth under Sāriputta. It is said that in Kassapa Buddha's time, they were **bats** living in a cave where two monks were reciting the Abhidhamma. So enthralled were they by their sound, although not knowing its meaning, they pass away into the heavens, and are reborn in Sāvathī. (See "Buddhist Legends" 3:51 f)

The point of all such stories, I think, is that we should treat animals well. When animals (like humans) die in a peaceful way, they are likely to be reborn in a better state where they go on to come in contact with the Dharma so that they attain spiritual liberation. Anyhow, it is nice to know that our pets or the animals we knew have been reborn as devas (gods) and have us to thank for their good rebirth! Let us then love life and love lives. This year we should spare some kind thoughts especially for the ox.

A very happy new year of the ox (2009).

17 THE FUTURE

17.1 Buddhist Prophecies For Our Times

(A reflection on the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta⁴⁶)

The Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 26) or the Discourse on Universal Monarch's Lion-roar is a long Buddhist prophecy of things to come. It relates to the distant future and the coming of the future Buddha.

The good news here is that we need not worry about the world ending in 2012 (or any time soon), since the Future Buddha has not yet come. Even then, the world will continue for a very long, long time, after that.

⁴⁶ See D 26 = SD 36.10.

17 The future

Rise of Social Problems

The Cakka,vatti Sutta (as it is called in short) at a high point, relates how the king, failing to help the poor, contributed to the rise of crime. Applying dependent arising to social development, the Sutta shows how the situation escalated:

- Thus, bhikshus, by not providing funds for the poor,
poverty became widespread.
- When poverty became widespread,
stealing became widespread.
- When stealing became widespread,
armed violence became widespread.
- When armed violence became widespread,
life-taking became widespread.
- When life-taking became widespread,
lying became widespread.
- When lying became widespread,
slander became widespread.
- When slander became widespread,
sexual misconduct became widespread.
- When sexual misconduct became widespread,
the two things, *harsh speech* and *frivolous talk*,
became widespread.
- When the harsh speech and frivolous talk
became widespread, the two things, *covetousness* and *ill
will*, became widespread.
- When covetousness and ill will became widespread,
wrong view became widespread.
- When wrong view became widespread,
the three things, *abnormal lust*, *uncontrolled desire* and
deviant practices, became widespread.
- When abnormal lust, uncontrolled desire and deviant practices
became widespread, *disrespect* towards mother, disrespect

towards father, disrespect towards recluseship [the spiritual life], disrespect towards celibacy [the holy life], and lack of respect for family elders became widespread.

When these things became widespread, the life-span of beings declined, their beauty declined, too.

For these humans whose life-span and beauty were declining, whose life-span was 250 years, that of their children was 100 years. (D 3:70 f) = SD 36.10

Commentary

In his Commentary, Buddhaghosa explains “*abnormal lust*” (*adhamma,rāga*) as incest, that is, “lust between mother and mother’s sister and father’s sister and maternal uncle’s wife and other such improper situations”; “*excessive greed*” (*visama,lobha*) or “*neurotic desire*,” as excessive greed by way of consuming things, in other words, unbridled materialism and consumerism); and “*deviant practices*” (*micchā,dhamma*) as homosexuality, that is, sex “between men and men, women with women.” (DA 3:853). On the Buddha’s explanation on how sexuality arises, see Saññoga Sutta.⁴⁷

Message For Our Times

Greed, especially when we do not know when to stop desiring, brings untold suffering. The greatest wealth you can enjoy is that which you have honestly and justly worked for. For, then you have created the good karma to attract wealth. People suffer great losses because they think they can cheat karma through gambling, cheating, absconding, unwise investments and so on. Evil friends also destroy our wealth and happiness: avoid them from afar, says the Sigāl’ovāda Sutta (D 31).

⁴⁷ See A 7.48/4: 57-59 = SD 8.7 Intro (1).

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Sexuality is, as a rule, a very private, limited and limiting process. The reason is simple enough: *sex hardwires biological survival and simply distracts us from spiritual evolution*. Sex can be glorified when it is politicized into “power groups.”

Sexuality is disempowering when it makes us measure people, to seek only certain aspects or “signs” (*nimitta*) of a person that we perceive as attractive or desirable. And when that attraction or desire changes (everything changes!), or our love-object ages, we lose interest (we forget that we too age and decay).

Sex for lay people within marriage is perfectly acceptable, provided, too, there is love and respect between the partners (which is an important aspect of the third precept).

Monastics, however, have taken the vow not to indulge in any kind of sexuality at all. Lay people should always keep a physical and social distance from monastics so that we in no way make them even think of falling from their celibate life. Monastics automatically lose their monastic being even if they have sex with an animal, says the Vinaya.

In our times, the safest place to seek the Dharma is within ourselves, in our mind, each of us as an island unto ourselves, that is, to learn and practise mindfulness:

Our body is impermanent,
Our feelings are impermanent,
Our mind is impermanent,
All phenomena are impermanent.

At the beginning and the end of the Cakkavatti Sutta, the Buddha declares:

Bhikkhus, those who now in my time or after me, would dwell with himself as an island, with himself as refuge, with no other refuge; dwell with the Dharma as an island, with

the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge they become the highest, but, bhikshus, they must be those who desire to learn [who have desire for training]. (D 3:77)

17.2 Will the World End In 2012?

[This is meant to be read after 2012!] Here we go again, in every century, in every generation, there is a prediction that the world will end. But here we are, 2012 has come and gone, and the doom-sayers are wrong again.

Buddhaghosa's Visuddhi,magga (translated at "The Path of Purification") gives an interesting and positive account of the world's end. It is said that we will know when the world is really going to end. "Heavenly messengers" called Loka,vyūha (World Marshals) will appear and warn us.

Having described how it would occur, they the World Marshals advise us: "Cultivate lovingkindness, good sirs, cultivate compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity, good sirs! Care for your mothers; care for your fathers; honour the elders of the clans!"

Hearing this, it is said, we will be filled with spiritual urgency (*sam-vega*), and become kind to one another, and make merit with lovingkindness, etc. In cultivating such good works, we will be able to attain dhyana (*jhāna*), and be reborn in the higher Brahma worlds. (Only the physical sense-world is destroyed.)

If you have a sort of scientific mind, you can say that when we realize the impending end of our world, there is a massive evacuation of earth space-ships, etc, to another safe universe! This is still a long way ahead. So there is a lot of time for scientific development in this area. Either way, this is clearly a more happy account of the world's end than that found in other religions.

17 The future

Buddhas do not as a rule arise in every world-cycle. But our present world-cycle is a fortunate one, because we have five Buddhas. Three Buddhas—Kakusandha, Koṇagamana and Kassapa—have arisen. We are now in the dispensation of Gotama Buddha. The next (and last) Buddha of our world-cycle, Metteyya⁴⁸, has yet to come. This will take a very long time, at least some thousand years, maybe longer.⁴⁹

What are the Buddhist teachings here in terms of mental cultivation? Now, the five mental hindrances are sense-desires (addictive desires), ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. Thinking too much about our past often causes remorse, guilt and worry. Thinking about the end of the world causes “restlessness,” feeling unease about things. This slows down, even stop, our mental cultivation. As such, it is unhealthy (as it is based on delusion and ignorance.)

Over the centuries, major predictions of the end of the world have been made, but you are still reading this. Over 60 of such failed predictions are listed here, if you are interested see below⁵⁰.

For those who are worried whether the world will really end or not: don't worry. At the rate people are predicting the world's end, it will surely come one day!

Meantime, let us get back to what we do best, and to be kind to others. Live now; the past is gone; the future has yet to come. Live this day as if it is your last, you will discover the true priorities of your life.

⁴⁸ For information on Metteyya, see Dictionary of Pali Proper Names: http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/me_mu/metteyya.htm.

⁴⁹ See the Cakkavatti Sīha, nāda Sutta, D 26.

⁵⁰ http://www.religioustolerance.org/end_wrl2.htm

18 FEEDBACK ON PIYA TAN'S WORKS

On Piya Tan's Sutta Discovery & Teachings
Selected Testimonies from 2008-2009

Weekly reflections

Ang Bee Khim, Singapore (July 2009)

It really help us a lot to deal with different situation in working and personal life. I was very upset with my work for some reasons and actually thought of resigning. After reading your email, I am very enlightened. I am indeed very thankful to you.

[Name withheld] China (July 2009)

Your counselling (both direct and indirectly through your Weekly Reflections) has been a tremendous source of support in my recent difficult period. I know it is unconditional but will return your goodwill in one form or another - when I can. Sharing is never lost, as you once said.

Arild Romarheim

Lutheran minister & lecturer, Norway (February 2009)

Thank you for having included my name on your mailing list. I have already sent forward some of your emails to my students. I consider those letters to be of great help for them, in order to get an idea of what Buddhism is all about.

Norman New, Singapore (July 2009)

I think your reflections are priceless. They "speak" a lot to me and invoke a lot of thoughts and emotions. I'm sure they do to others as well and I am sure others would want to share their comments and thoughts on what you have written.

As such wouldn't it be a great idea for you to start a blog? The reasons are twofold.

18 Feedback on Piya Tan's works

1. Your reflections would be kept permanently in one place and all your previous entries would be archived (people who are interested in your earlier entries would be able to retrieve them)
2. People would have a chance to comment on what you have written and it could potentially spark off a fruitful discussion as thoughts and ideas bounce off one another.

Tan Puay Khai (December 2008)

Thanks for the insightful view, it was a wonderful way of seeing things that transcend different "tribal" segregation. If only more are open minded to see it this way.

Sutta Discovery

Bhikkhu Sumana, Sri Lanka

(February 2009)

I am writing to you from Na Uyana Forest Monastery,...Sri Lanka. We were fortunate enough last year to obtain some of your translations and introductions to the Nikayas from an Australian monk, Ven. Jaganatha. I have the following questions for you:

1. Are we allowed to print the documents that we already have for the library here, I only ask as they have a copyright sign on them?
2. Where we can obtain your more up to date essays, introductions and translations without using the internet?

(May 2009)

Many thanks for the CD's which arrived safely a few days ago, it seems you have invested a huge amount time into this project judging by the sheer volume of suttas translated, very inspiring.

I enjoyed reading your translation and notes on the Channaovada sutta, especially about the English monk Nanavira, a controversial figure in Sri Lanka.

(June 2009)

I have printed out quite a few of your articles and translations now and the feedback has been good. Would you have any objections if we were to use your translations for putting text into speech? ... So monks can listen to your sutta translations on their MP3s.

Clement Tan, Malaysia (Feb 2009)

Thank you Bro. Piya, and I would like to congratulate you on your excellent work.

To-date I think the Sutta Discovery Series is the most comprehensive and thought provoking work available.

Do keep up the good work for the benefit of the many.

Kaccayana Bhikkhu, Germany, May 2008

Thousand thanks for the two CD's with your precious Sutta material, which arrived two days back! I also downloaded some from the website you mentioned. All that is very precious and most useful for our sutta study group over here. ...

May you be blessed by your precious dhammadana. May all your noble wishes come true. May you reach the bliss of Nibbana soon!

Lee Hang Lim, Singapore (November 2008)

You a great man and doing some things not all laymen can insist doing it and carry on for so many years.

Loo Mew Ling, Malaysia (December 2008)

Thank you bhante for your valuable sharing. To me you are no ordinary person. Your wonderful ideas in the Sutta translation has given me lots of inspiration and also insight into a better understanding of Pali. May you have peace and happiness and good health to continue this noble job.

18 Feedback on Piya Tan's works

Low Teck Suan, Australia (July 2009)

First I salute you for your relentless Dhamma work, Sadhu x3.

As I am pioneering an effort here in Sydney to get people especially the younger generation to learn and practice the mere Dhamma (non-religious Buddhism) because many white Australians as well as younger Asian migrants here who are more educated are disillusioned with ethnic Buddhism...

Hence, my effort to present the Buddha Dhamma as it was taught by Lord Buddha and NOT "Buddhism" as popularly seen these days everywhere.

We are very impressed with your work and the Minding Centre website. May I have your compassionate permission to allow us to borrow some of your writings and content on your website to support our effort here....

I look forward to inviting you one day to Australia for Dhamma work.

Santikara Wee, Singapore (November 2008)

Thanks for your clarification. I have been reading a few suttas from your website, and have even started to recite your translated Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta when I do my evening puja daily. I felt so enthused and blessed each time after the recitation. I really feel very blessed and delighted to be able to read the translated Nikayas.

Really grateful that you are translating the suttas and providing introductions and explanations to help us better understand the suttas.

— — —

The goodness in us is like a lightning rod
that attracts other's goodness and ground them



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PIYA TAN is a rare teacher in the Buddhist world. Based on his own extensive experience, his authentic, intelligent inquiry into the Buddha's words is applied to the urgent task of discovering how to best live in a changing and challenging world.

I have often used his detailed studies of Buddhist scriptures as guides for my own classes.

In *Simple Joys*, however, he speaks not as a scholar, but as a practitioner. In this he shows the paradoxical truth of a genuine spiritual path: as complex and demanding as it may be, the deepest truths are always simple.

Bhante Sujato
Abbot of Santi Forest Monastery
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